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Libraries, Churches, and Schools: The Literate Lives of Mothers and Children in a Homeless Shelter

Laurie MacGillivray[1]*, Amy Lassiter Ardell[2]* and Margaret Sauceda Curwen[3]*

Abstract

This article addresses the question, "How do mothers and children in a homeless shelter interact with literacy?" We drew on the theoretical framework of social literacy practices in which cultural context is foregrounded. Data for this qualitative study included participant observation in one homeless shelter and interviews with one shelter's residents and other stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, shelter staff at various shelters, and homelessness experts across Los Angeles County, California. While examining the literacy practices of women and children living in one transitional shelter, we identified three institutions that were part of their lives (a) the public library, in which choice was a major factor; (b) the church, which focused on reading the Bible; and (c) schools, where literacy was tied to evaluative outcomes. Although families were overwhelmingly positive about their participation in each of these institutions and all three were referred to as places for learning, children's talk about reading and writing in school focused on procedures such as daily routines and testing. This may reflect the current mandated curriculum as well as the cost of frequent moves, which necessitate that children learn how to succeed in each new school. This study captures the

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influence of different institutions on the literacy practices of families in crisis and suggests ways to further support reading and writing for children living without homes.

Keywords

Katherine used to write songs and stories when she was young. Now an adult, she has been homeless for four years. Although she is too preoccupied now with housing and job concerns to engage in writing for pleasure, she fosters literacy engagement for her four children. "If something comes into your mind, write it down. Because if you don't you'll forget about it later," she tells them. Chelsea, her 9 year old, especially likes to read and write. She shares, "I'm in the fifth [grade reading] passage and I'm getting a lot of words right in one minute. My teacher wanted to put me on a sixth-grade book, but there were none in the school." Katherine's children have library cards because she was able to use an identification card and the shelter's address to obtain them. In the midst of living without a home, she encourages her children to use writing and reading for their own purposes.

Katherine's children are among the approximately 1.5 million children who go to sleep each night without a home of their own (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). According to a recent study, California has the third highest percentage of homeless children in the nation (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). In Los Angeles County, where this study was conducted, estimates vary. In an interview, a knowledgeable employee from the Los Angeles Unified School District estimates they serve between 7,000 and 20,000 homeless students. This wide range reflects the inherent difficulty of identifying a highly mobile population. The local nonprofit Shelter Partnership, Inc. (2004) estimates 9,000 of the 84,000 homeless in the region are children. Yet, even with these growing numbers, we know little about the out-of-school experiences of this population.

Our study focuses on how women and children living in transitional shelters interact with literacy. We situate our work in the nexus of federal policy regarding homelessness, the effects of homelessness on children's school performance, and family literacy practices. After reviewing background information on the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (2001) and research on homeless children and family literacy practices, we describe our study, the findings, and implications.

Background

Federal Policy

The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 defines a homeless person as one who (a) lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence or (b) lives in a shelter, an institution or a place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a sleeping accommodation for human beings. The act is also meant to ensure children of homeless families continued access to public schooling. Still, the barriers to an uninterrupted school experience are monumental. Issues related to residency, guardianship, school records, immunization, and transportation, although addressed by this legislation and its subsequent renewal and revision in 2001 with No Child Left Behind, can still be obstacles to school attendance (Maywinney-Rhoads & Stabler, 2006; Stronge, 2000).

Homelessness and Children's Academic Performance

Standardized tests indicate that elementary school children who are homeless are often a year behind academically (Stronge, 1992). Students' low achievement can be linked to schools' ineffective or inadequate placement, services, and academic support and personal/familial socioemotional concerns (Maywinney-Rhoads & Stabler, 2006; Stronge, 2000). Research related specifically to reading behaviors of homeless children and their school achievement is sparse. The Wide Range Achievement Test–Revised and other standardized tests have been used to assess outcomes (Danesco & Holden, 1998). A case study by Newman (1999) describes one young girl's struggle to read and behave acceptably in a small reading group. Although teachers are beginning to think about how to counter assumptions about homeless students and better support them in the classroom (Noll & Watkins, 2003; Quint, 1994; Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008), information about the reading preferences and processes for children who are homeless is still incomplete.

Noll and Watkins (2003) worked with homeless children in a variety of ways in after-school and summer programs, a full-day preschool, and a new program that kept homeless students at the same school regardless of where they were staying. They found that although there were likely to be gaps in traditional literacy skills, students tended to be good at inferences and character analysis as well as out-of-school literacies such as figuring out complex forms. In describing the successes and difficulties of one reading intervention project conducted in homeless shelters, Hanning (1996, 1998) noted that books can be a way for parents and children to personally connect while also improving a child's self-esteem.

In a recent comprehensive literacy study with children who are homeless, Sinatra (2007) conducted an academic-based summer intervention over 4 years. Children participated in a rich literacy program, interacted with multimedia projects, and participated in athletic activities such as swimming. Children reported feeling that had learned during the program, and the assessment showed improved writing. Substantial funding and a highly developed curriculum contributed to the success. Yet, the limited duration and difficulty with regular attendance were still issues as is often the case with this population.

The lack of sustained continuity in living arrangements also strains parent–child interactions. During times of homelessness, parents often face poor health, economic crises, and emotional upheavals. Nunez and Collignon (2000) further identified factors that prevent parents from playing the important roles of nurturer, advocate, and teacher. According to their study, the distractions of homelessness and the limited educational preparation of parents hinder their ability to assist with homework. Furthermore, these factors contribute to educational alienation and family instability. Living in shelters, although perhaps a better alternative to the street, brings with it several specific problems such as lack of privacy, rigorous guidelines and rules, shared bathroom facilities, and a need to cope with the behaviors of other children and adults (Morris & Strong, 2004; Swick, 2009; Van Ry, 1992). Research has noted that parents can play pivotal roles in supporting their children's emotional and mental health through the creation of personal space (Rivlin, 1990) and the establishment of social buffering factors (Landow & Glenwick, 1999).

Family Literacy Practices

Research on the literacy activities of families has included specific attention to how non-White, low-income children interact with print (for review, see Gadsden, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2000). Much of the work has contrasted home and school literacy primarily documenting and analyzing family literacy practices and their disconnection with school (e.g., Aguilar, MacGillivray, & Walker, 2003; Heath, 1983; Monkman, MacGillivray, & Leyva, 2003; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Examining the types of print, the related institutions, and associated domains such as religion and commerce have all been ways researchers have described reading and writing that occurs beyond school (e.g., Eakle, 2007; MacGillivray, 2010; MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, in press; Sarroub, 2002; Teale, 1986).

This article addresses the question, "How do mothers and children in a homeless shelter interact with literacy?" This inquiry is part of a larger study on the out-of-school literacy practices of children who are homeless and the

available community and family resources that support their academic development. This work is formative in providing insight into the literacy engagement of families living in shelters.

Theoretical Framework

A social literacy practices perspective refers to the "general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in particular situations" (Barton, 2001, p. 96). This belief is nestled within sociocultural theory, which examines literacy practices that "refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2001, p. 22). A community, or cultural context, is established through the accepted practices, norms, and routines of a particular group of individuals.

Within a literacy practice are specific literacy events, which are the visible episodes of individuals' experiences mediated through text (Street, 2001). Drawing from our data, one example of this notion is the making of a Mothers' Day card. This is an observable act and thus a literacy event. Yet, the act becomes meaningful when it is situated within the broader outcome of connecting with others (a literacy practice). A second example focuses on a group of children discussing Bible verses (a literacy event) and the way this tied to the broader outcome of demonstrating a close relationship with God (a literacy practice). (For other examples, see Barton & Hamilton, 2000; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007. See MacGillivray, 2010, for an in-depth discussion of children's Bible-based literacy practices.) By examining everyday literacy practices in different domains of life, it is possible to gain insight into their distinctive characteristics (Barton, 2001).

This theory attends to variations in the uses and meaning of literacy across contexts (Street, 2001). By describing literacy events and then linking them to larger literacy and cultural practices, the framework discourages reliance on preconceived concepts of family literacy (e.g., bedtime read alouds and home libraries) and extends to other domains and purposes (e.g., Farr & Guerra, 1995; Heath, 1983; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Institutional demands and expectations are recognized but so are the more informal expectations and pressures of the family or peer group, which are often more influential (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; e.g., Heath, 1983; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007).

This expansive view of literacy as a text-based interaction occurs across contexts and for a variety of purposes. Thus, we assume that the way people go about reading and writing reflects a rich and complex situation ripe with tensions, assumptions, desires, and intentions. As we examine the broad

institutions of libraries, churches, and schools, we ground this examination through the interpretations of homeless women and children.

Limitations of the Study

Shelters themselves are diverse in terms of facilities, personnel, rules, services, and acceptable length of stay. In presenting findings from this qualitative case study, we represent the perspectives of women and children residing in one homeless shelter at a particular point in time. Representative details of families' social class status, which in some cases is fluid, have been included throughout the article.

Context and Method

Safe Shelter (pseudonym), located in a community near downtown Los Angeles, was chosen to serve as a primary research site to offer a microview of the realities of life in a homeless shelter. Because there is such diversity within the population of homeless mothers and children, finding a representational group within one shelter was difficult. The variations include ethnicity, social class, religion, family structure, age of family members, number of children, and causes of homelessness. Safe Shelter is a nonprofit shelter for homeless and battered women operating primarily on donations and private funding. Located in a residential neighborhood, the shelter is comprised of three adjacent houses. One house is an emergency shelter in which mothers and their children can stay up to 3 months. The other two houses offer transitional housing of up to a year. Residents must either be looking for work, employed, or going to school. All residents must be in at 6 o'clock each night as well as save the majority of their earnings. The families stay in rooms furnished with bunk beds and a dresser. They share a living room and kitchen with up to three other families.

The first author gathered data at the shelter. She served as a participant observer in the primary shelter for 4 months, documenting when and how families utilized their literacy skills during evenings and on weekends. Formal interviews were also conducted with nine children ranging in age from 6 to 13 years, five mothers, and two members of the shelter staff, with representation from both the emergency and transitional houses. Participants were an ethnic mix of Latinas, African Americans, and Whites.

The mothers in the shelters versus on the street tend to be functioning more successfully in society insofar as they must be able to meet the homeless shelter requirements. This means the mothers (a) have contacted the shelter

by themselves or with the help of another; (b) have met the requirements, such as willingness to turn a percentage of their income over to a case worker and attend school or work; and (c) have complied with rules, such as not having male visitors, completing assigned chores, and maintaining a clean and sober lifestyle.

We would like to note that we view families living in homeless shelters as potentially facing the same crises as families with housing, including poverty, joblessness, domestic abuse, drug or alcohol addiction, and/or poor health. What makes this population unique are the additional circumstances of living in transitory housing with strict regulations and in proximity with others similarly in crisis.

The purpose of the interviews was to extend and clarify information gathered during observations. In the interviews with children, topics included the following: their perceptions of reading and writing, their in-school and out-of-school literacy activities, the ways those around them help or hinder their ability to complete their homework and read for pleasure, and how being at the shelter affects their ability to be successful at school. The interviews with the mothers addressed the following: the content of their children's interview, their children's literacy development, and the ways schools and shelters have offered support or barriers to their children's literacy growth. Mothers were also asked to contrast and compare their experiences of different schools and shelters. Continuing the interviews beyond the observations provided for member checking after the observation data had been collected.

After each visit to the shelter, the first author wrote expanded field notes. Interviews were professionally transcribed and then read and reviewed by members of the research team. We discussed the ways mothers and children talked about literacy and education in general, how the time in the shelter seemed to contrast to previous experiences, and the impact of shelter life on literacy practices. Interactions and quotes that were representative of literacy practices were identified and discussed. Talk of school was common; what we did not expect was the strong influence of the church and the library. Thus, we began to code for each of these three institutions in the field notes and interview transcripts. We looked for key terms, including *school library* and *library books* for library, *Bible* and *scripture* for church, and *teacher* and *classroom* for school.

To create a structured way of thinking about participants' responses, we asked ourselves three primary questions. First, how do participants describe their literacy interactions with specific attention to the shelter, churches, libraries, and schools? Second, what literacy events are occurring within and across

institutions? Third, how are these events situated within larger social practices? Particular attention was paid to how mothers and children talked about their literacy practices in relation to the circumstances of their lives.

The next round of analysis included juxtaposing our findings to other data sources, including interviews with key stakeholders consisting of shelter staff, teachers, principals, and experts in family homelessness. The final step included gathering input from the mothers and children regarding the accuracy of our interpretations. They confirmed our findings and further elaborated on key points. A grant allowed us to give a small children's library to the shelter at the end of the study. Two of the women and their children accompanied the first author to a bookstore and helped make book selections.

Results

Women and children in this study engaged with print in a variety of ways. It is important to note the staff at Safe Shelter did not explicitly design activities to promote and/or support families' literacy development. All literacy practices documented in the following section were initiated by the mothers and their children who shared these shelter transitory living arrangements in situations where they often lacked privacy. We first describe family literacy practices in the homeless shelter, then the specifics of literacy events in the context of three institutions: libraries, churches, and schools.

Reading and Writing in the Homeless Shelter

Mothers and children read for pleasure and wrote stories and journal entries based on their own lives. The space of the shelter enabled these activities to occur. The situation of being in a homeless shelter made particular literacy events more poignant. One mother described her experience of escaping through books by stating,

> I like to read. I know I like to read. We [another mother at the shelter] share books all the time. We read. I'll give her a book after I finished it. That keeps me . . . I don't know. It's like I just get into this world of the book. It's like I'm in there and I just leave this, the shelter, that's my escape. I'm no longer in the shelter, I'm with the people . . . just a different world all together, and it just puts me to sleep to where the shelter's not even on my mind. I go into my room, and it's my own little space. I disconnect myself with everything else. Nothing else matters. (Delia)

For this mother, someone who had experienced multiple shelters but who had been high school valedictorian, the event of reading had dual purposes. Reading was a way to create privacy within close living quarters as well as the larger social practice of connecting with others.

Children's reading habits, as reported by the children themselves, also seemed to act as one way to create their own space. One girl described how she chose the thickest books she could find, "'cause I want to read for a long time" (Jackie), whereas another girl explained, "Like when I read the book it seems like I'm in there . . . the book . . . And I like reading it. I read like two or three chapters a day" (Krista). When asked about their children's preferences, mothers described how reading was an integral part of some or all of their children's lives. These children read "anything" (Cybil). One mother said her son would, "pick up a milk carton and start reading" (Delia), whereas another mother joked that her daughter would be "in the restroom and there's a Reader's Digest" (Roslynn). In fact, multiple resources were mentioned as ways to find books and materials, including public libraries, school libraries, school book orders, friends, family members, yard sales, thrift shops, and bookstores. Children discussed their favorite texts at length and in detail, sometimes making intertextual connections between a book and the film rendition, at other times listing favorite genres, series, and authors.

These events were a part of the larger social practice of connecting with others through shared experiences. For example, one conversation that took place among children was representative of the kind of excitement around books. One child talked about a book which her cousin's friend had given her. After going on at length with a very detailed description of the events of chapter 1, she finishes by saying, "and the next [chapter] is "Good Times". . . . That's the next chapter I'm gonna read tonight." Another girl, riveted by the description of the book insisted, "Okay, you better tell me about that chapter. Call me. Let me give you my cell phone number" (Group interview). Like their mothers, these children read for pleasure; the social nature of shelter life in this case encouraged interest in books between peers. Sharing close living quarters at Safe Shelter, the children turned to one another for entertainment and activities to spend time. Book talks were one way children could establish relationships with one another.

Writing was also an ongoing activity for both mothers and children, although to a lesser extent than reading. The shelter staff asked women to document problems they were having in writing, although one woman perceived this act as a form of "snitching" (Delia). She went on to explain, "When I get upset, I do a lot of free writing where I'll just write everything down that I'm thinking, and then I'll tear it up and throw it away" (Delia). Here she took a

writing event sanctioned by the shelter and then changed it to fit within her preferred literacy practices. This same mother noted that her children were more reluctant to write as

> it gets to where they're paying attention to how their cursive is. I'm like, it don't matter what it looks like . . . you're not going to publish no book right now. Just write. It releases a lot of that frustration inside and you'll see. Because I write books. I will write pages and pages. (Delia)

One young girl was also able to create a space for writing during the day care time provided by the shelter. Although the official activity was to draw, she noted that she used this time to write stories and illustrate them to make little books about her life. Sometimes, if the other kids were still drawing, she could also find time to read her compositions to herself.

Reading and writing between family members also served to connect them as well as to create a private space. One mother who described herself as "not a school person" but who had a high-achieving fifth grader told a story of her daughter passing notes to her during dinner as a way of communicating without other shelter families knowing the message. Children made greeting cards for their mothers to wish them happy birthday, express love on Mother's Day, or encourage a speedy recovery when they were sick. Nightly bedtime rituals frequently included mothers and children reading together. Younger siblings often emulated the practices of their big brothers and sisters. One mother, crediting the stability of the shelter as allowing for a calmer family life than they had been experiencing doubled up with family and living in motels, described the ways her toddler son looked up to his big sister,

> He will sit down and pretend to read. When he sees [his sister], she gives him good examples. He likes to write, he wants to draw. She just started doing crossword puzzles too . . . I had never thought of giving her them, but she likes them so I told her, "Okay, we'll go get a [crossword puzzle] book." And he sees her and he wants to do it too. So she rubs a lot of good off on him. (Cybil)

In these ways, reading and writing were part of the forging of family bonds.

Even with these many examples of individual and family literacy, shelter life interrupted some previously established literacy habits. One mother who had a relative who worked at a bookstore explained why she did not read at the shelter, saying,

> I have a lot of books . . . they're all in storage since we're here and just moving so much you know, a lot of things change that I did enjoy . . . just drawing and writing in my journal and maybe reading a little bit. (Roslynn)

Another mother reminisced about the kinds of things she did with her children before moving to the shelter, such as going to the library. Now in the shelter and without transportation, such activities became more difficult. Still, others discussed the emotional reasons that prevented them from continuing with nightly reading rituals. One mother who had recently lost her office job due to a family emergency explained,

> Every night she'll [daughter] tell me to read to her . . . I try to. Lately these last days I've been going through this, yesterday I didn't, today I didn't. She understands I don't feel good, so she'll get the book and read it. (Cybil)

In addition, three mothers discussed having kept a personal journal in the past, an activity that may have been interrupted by living in a shelter with no privacy and inability to lock up belongings. It made little sense to maintain highly personal writing. Thus, both logistical and emotional issues of shelter living made some recreational reading and writing more difficult for families.

Libraries, Churches, and Schools

As previously stated, women and children often read and wrote in the context of three main institutions: libraries, churches, and schools. Individual participation in these organizations varied; some practices were culturally tied. Families referenced these places frequently in the context of their literacy lives, during visits, and interviews. Still, the circumstances of living in a homeless shelter framed their participation.

Libraries. Four elements seemed to generate excitement about the public library: the ability to check out many titles at one time, the ability to choose what to read, the availability of family programs, and the fact that all of the above came at no cost. These elements supported a range of activities. Children animatedly talked about the books they checked out from the library. After a detailed plot description of a book from the Horrible Harry series (Kline, 1999), one young girl enthused,

Those are my favorite, favorite, favorite books . . . I went to the library
and I was sassing the lady that works there saying if there was any
more and they [*sic*] said "No" and I was like, "Oh, man." (Alysha)

The availability of many titles meant children could explore their own interests
and develop a sense of reading as an enjoyable activity. Asking for specific
books and requesting help from the librarian was one way to claim competence
as a reader and as a learner.

The free-flowing nature of the library also allowed for parents to actively
participate in their children's reading. Noting the lack of literacy programs
available for children at the shelter and in the community, one mother talked
about the public library as being the place she could take her children to sup-
port their literacy development. A young girl from another family talked
about her weekly library ritual of checking out eight or more books. When
asked how she chose what to read, she cited her mother's influence, "We just
look at the pages. My mom said if they're too short, you can't get them. If
they're good enough for your age, you can get them" (Emily). Library atten-
dance served as a springboard for parents to communicate messages about
the expectations that they had for their children as readers. As institutions,
libraries supported literacy events that tie to the larger cultural practices of
coming together as part of a community. It was also a place where parents
made decisions such as when to go, how long to stay, how to spend time
while in the library, and what to check out. This kind of power seemed to be
especially important when mothers and children in shelters live by others'
rules.

However, when the nearby library closed for renovation, many families at
the shelter suspended regular attendance habits. Transportation issues were
often cited as a reason for not going to the library. Transience and lack of
space also deterred use. Nevertheless, it was seen as an important institution
to many mothers and children. One mother described her desire to pay a
US$70 fee for an overdue book so that she could continue utilizing her privi-
leges despite an embarrassing exchange with a librarian. Another mother
who was politically active shared that the free Internet service at the library
helped her to access alternative news sources. A third woman described its
role in her single-parenting life as follows,

Her dad wasn't around and it was just me and I didn't have nothing, no
TV, no radio, nothing. I had a library card and there was a library down
the street, and I said, okay, I'm going, you know, to read to her. I picked
books on everything. On different countries, on different cultures, on

just any and everything. I would get it and just read to her. She might not have understood completely, but that's all we had and it was fun. We would go to the library for their magic show . . . you know, the library sometimes has special events. (Roslynn)

For this family, the library facilitated parent–child bonds. The mother also saw it as a safe place for developing a love for books. She was acting as the one with knowledge who was supporting her child's literacy growth. Roslynn proudly shared that her daughter was currently a tutor for struggling readers at school.

The library supported literacy events linked to the social practices of creating a community of learners through shared experiences and values, such as believing in the importance of supporting children's reading.

Churches. Mothers and children also talked enthusiastically about church. It offered a safe place to be physically as well as emotionally. Church offered continuity in the midst of continual change. For two families, fellow congregation members and occasionally the minister picked them up so they could remain active despite their lack of transportation. Being able to sustain relationships in the midst of turmoil was clearly valued. This was a time when other relationships were frequently fractured. Mothers were often disassociating with friends due to their drug and alcohol practices or their ongoing contact with an abusive spouse; relationships with family members were often strained as many stayed with them prior to moving into the shelter, and simple geographic distance made sustaining friendships difficult. So the church offered stability, a valuable commodity when homeless.

For the mothers and children, the Bible was at the center of religious practices. Reading, rereading, reading aloud, memorizing, and content analysis were all integral to their religious practices. For children, specific literacy acts were associated with the church: reading church bulletins and hymnal books, taking notes during sermons, being encouraged to ask questions about Biblical passages, and memorizing verses. Religion also served as a way to quickly form bonds with other children (see MacGillivray, 2010) when friendships were fleeting. When asked to introduce themselves with their name, age, and school, during our group interview, the following interaction ensued:

One girl spontaneously offered, "And I'm a Christian." Two others followed with, "Me too! Me too!" She continued, "And I like to read about the Bible and" but was interrupted again with, "Me too! Me too!" "And believe in the Lord." The echoes continued, "Me too! Me too!" "Hallelujah!" she exclaimed and the other two followed with, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" But as one started to laugh, she reprimanded, "No, don't kid." (Group interview).

This is an example of how Christianity was a uniting force. Yet, when humor occurred in during the "hallelujahs," the girl who introduced the topic quickly reprimanded the others, staking a claim to being a person who took religion seriously. When forming often short-term relationships with other children in the shelter, positioning one's self as a religious person quickly established connections. The literacy practices surrounding the Bible linked to the larger social practice of creating communities.

During this same discussion, the children spontaneously talked of their personal promises to God. These were verses that they worked to memorize by reading the Bible everyday. The children bantered about which verses they were memorizing—They compared promises and explained the reason. Once again they piggybacked on each other's words. When asked about what they read, one responded, "The Bible." Others followed with, "Me too. Me too" and "everyday." Then they included specifics about what they read including their mothers' interventions. One offered that she read the scriptures. "My mom makes me," declared one child with a sibling adding, "and she makes us read our promise." Then another girl offered that she read Revelations and later elaborated, "It's scary, it's kind of scary." Two others were reading different verses from Psalms. One clarified, "And we have to read that like everyday. It's our promise to God that we'll read." Reading the Bible at Safe Shelter extended the formal institution of the physical church to the proximity of the shelter space, where families built communities. These children came together around religious reading regardless of their histories, reasons for homelessness, or other differences. Shelter families also occasionally read and prayed together across church affiliations creating yet another safe and positive space.

One child, whose relative was a pastor, took notes during the sermons. She shared the notebooks with the first author after her mother proudly talked of this practice. The daughter explained that she enjoyed taking notes during sermons, "just to remember it and just keep writing to the Lord" (Alysha). Daily scripture readings were common family rituals; some families even chose to hang particularly meaningful passages on the walls of their room. One mother explained that she wanted to see the motivational verses every-day to give her strength. They reminded her of who she wanted to be—yet another example of how the church encouraged meaningful interactions with print.

Two girls decided on their own to read the Bible in its entirety. One mother, who herself had been raised in and out of foster homes and viewed her time in the shelter as an opportunity to make changes in her life, described her daughter's own goal-driven endeavor,

> Scripture a day. She's . . . decided to start from the beginning, and she reads about a scripture a day everyday. She's already on her second book of the Bible 'cause there's 60 different books in there. She's on the second book and what amazes me 'cause she'll, after whatever she reads, she'll tell you about it and it's how she tells you about it; she just puts energy in it and she's excited and you're listening to the story like, oh my God, you're there you know but she really grasped the concept of the Bible, which some things I can't you know. (Roslynn)

Reading and writing supported individuals in their communication with God and each other.

Practices related to the church and literacy strengthened families, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. Still, certain shelter rules impinged on church participation. For example, one mother's conscientious adherence to the shelter's 6:00 p.m. curfew meant that she participated in an evening Bible study group over the telephone rather than in person. When she broke a series of rules, another woman lost the privilege of leaving the shelter and attending services one weekend.

Schools. Mothers' and children's talk about school was positive, yet differed from the other two institutions of library and church. Although they consistently referred to their affection for their teachers, children's discussions of reading and writing at school were tied to specific purposes and outcomes, such as answering questions at the end of the chapter, preparations for district and state examinations, and "fluency reading" (Krista). In sharp contrast to the thick descriptions of literacy practices with library and religious texts, children and parents used procedural and evaluative terms in relation to school. For example, they described language arts as a time when they "do response to literature" (Group interview). One child described her typical school day as,

> We do our routine. We do the Pledge of Allegiance and then we do calendar and then we do sound cards . . . and then after that we do spelling . . . and then we do OCR [Open Court Reading], that's like we read a story . . . and then we talk about it and we read it . . . then after we finish all the stories on Friday, we take a test about the story. (Alysha)

Children's grasp of the institutional language of school was evident.

In this same vein, language used to describe good readers was tied to official measures. One second-grade child talked of a classmate who was "on

level nine. It's a hard book and it has third-grade words. But I'm on level seven now and I'm almost next to there, but I know I'll be able to make it up and pass second grade" (Scott). In this instance, there was room to claim competence as a learner. Although none of the children who attended the local public school could recall the title or plot of any of their school readings (these being the same children who discussed church and library texts at length), they often spoke in admiration of their teacher's ability to read with expression. One child, who was the only one to remain in her suburban home district, mentioned her fondness for her teacher's read aloud of *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), a book she found particularly moving.

School writing was discussed almost exclusively in terms of neatness and length. Good writers write, "really, really neat and put everything in order, like paragraphs" (Krista). Again, evaluation was seen as the purpose of this activity. One child talked about doing "writer's workshop" for "this big test . . . something about characteristics and when we're done reading our anthology chapter then we have the test. It's a big, big test . . . the most important test . . . the state's test" (Alyson). Although this child went on in great detail about the story she planned to write—a particularly memorable birthday celebration—it is interesting that she saw this event as a test of competence rather than an opportunity to share her writing. The children seemed to link success to the institution's cultural practice of valuing knowing how to "do" school.

Homework was generally completed during children's participation in after-school programs. Parents talked about their nightly responsibility to sign-off on completed work. When one mother noticed that her daughter's homework was not getting done in the program, she spoke to the after-school director to have the situation rectified. But even with homework being done mostly at school, there was some evidence that it was a family affair. She explained,

[My daughter] studies with me . . . because I have to study every night like since I've been going to school. She's been doing a lot better since I have to turn off the TV and study, so she has to do the same thing. (Athena)

One boy's nightly homework assignment was to read an excerpt from a 1982 Ginn Reader five times as a way of practicing his fluency. One day he chose to read to an 18 month old with whom he was sharing a house rather than his mother. Group living expanded his choices for a read aloud audience.

Another child stated that homework was no different while staying at the shelter, "It's the same thing . . . I'm going to do it" (Erin). Her expectations for completing assignments superseded the stressful living arrangements.

As mentioned, both students and their mothers talked fondly of their classroom teachers. In the only instance when a negative experience with a teacher was mentioned, the mother solved the problem by pulling her daughter from the site and placing her in a better school. Mothers mentioned that they did not think teachers treated their children differently because of their homelessness; most were not even sure teachers were aware of their living situation. When one mother, who had doubled up with family and stayed in motels prior to her stay in the shelter, was asked if she would want her child's teacher to know, she replied,

> I wouldn't mind. When I first started going through this situation it was, I guess you could say, embarrassing for me. I wouldn't really even talk about it. I couldn't say the word "homeless." I didn't want anyone to know what I was going through. Now it's a real situation, and it's nothing to be ashamed of because people go through it all the time. I mean, there are people out there that are literally sleeping on the streets and in cars, and it's really hard. So yeah, I wouldn't mind. It's not a bother to me. (Cybil)

For children, embarrassment was more apparent. One brother and sister who had stayed in multiple shelters said they give their friends their grandmother's address and phone number so that they would not be identified as homeless.

The circumstances of homelessness overlapped with schooling in negative ways. Although two mothers were careful to ensure that their children did not change schools very often, most children had already attended three or more sites. These frequent changes had an effect on students academically. One mother mentioned that her 16-year-old son, who was not able to stay with her at the shelter, had lost three academic credits because of frequent moves. Another boy explained that previously his consistent attendance in elementary school helped him get straight A's and placement on the Honor Roll. However, his family's recent homelessness meant he had attended four schools in a 5-month span of time. Now, he was failing. He clarified,

> In [the] 2 weeks we were looking for a shelter, we didn't go to school. [It was hard] especially on tests. I don't usually fail tests, but I flunked a couple. Because there's a lot of stuff I miss . . . . [The schools] are all easy, it's just you miss stuff. That's what makes it harder. (Leslie)

His mother confirmed,

> He went to [name of school] and when I got his report card . . . he had
> two fails, a C, and a D. I was like, you know what, I'm not going to get
> on you about this one because usually I would have hit the roof. I was
> like, I understand. He was like, "Mom," and that's when he said, "I've
> been to four schools, you can't expect me to . . . I've only been there a
> month. I barely got used to a lot of the kids and now we're moving
> again." Because we'll be gone Tuesday. And he got really upset . . .
> I was like, "We're going through a difficult situation. It's not going to
> be like this forever." He's like, "Why can't we go back to the house?"
> I was like, you know my [batterer's] there and you can't. And he's like,
> "But we liked it there. We stayed at our school for years." (Delia)

When her son offered to quit school upon turning 14 so that he could help
financially, his mother refused, reminding him that his doing well in school
was the top priority. Although the school district this child attends uses a
standardized curriculum, in part because of these types of situations, it did
not have the desired effect of providing the consistency that would help him
keep up with his schoolwork. With his high mobility, he talked of the difficulty
in getting to know the teachers and the other students in such brief periods of
school attendance. His experience reflects the discussions in the literature
of ineffective or inadequate school placement, lack of academic support at
the school and personal/familial socioemotional concerns (Stronge, 2000).
A standardized curriculum does not automatically ameliorate the upsets and
social adjustments required when a child experiences transitory living.

Reflections: Literacy in Shelter Living

The powerful way these mothers and children talked of their own literacy
practices was a surprise for two reasons. First, interviews with the shelter
staff indicated that the shelter did not focus on activities to support families'
literacy development. Although some other shelters do more, such as having
a reading area, this is difficult due to lack of funds, space limitations, and the
demands of more pressing issues.

Thus, both general activities and institutional participation were solely the
initiative of the families themselves. This is particularly taxing when mothers
and children were dealing with the crisis of homelessness (Boxill & Beaty,
1990; Nunez & Collignon, 2000; Van Ry, 1992). Second, staff members were
not aware of any book talk, schoolwork, or pleasure reading and writing by

the older children and adults. It is clear that although family literacy activities may have not been traditional storybook reading or explicit public displays, they did exist and were often linked to the literacy social practices of connecting with others and claiming competence (also see Gonzalez, 2001; Heath, 1983; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). As these often occurred both within the private space of a family's room, as well as in the midst of the frequently frenetic life that comes with multiple mothers and young children cooking, cleaning, playing, fighting, and crying, literacy events often went unrecognized.

Notably, when given the opportunity, the shelter specifically supported literacy. As mentioned, at the end of our study we gave the shelter a selection of children's books and helped to create a checkout system with the families and staff. Yet, due to the number of existing demands on shelter staff, we were not optimistic about library usage. However, a year later when the first author returned for a visit, the shelter's library was doing well as revealed by several pages of recent checkouts.

Despite limited financial resources, parents often purchased books—frequently taking the opportunity offered by book orders such as Scholastic. In addition, they gained access to texts and supplies via institutions, such as schools, libraries, and churches. The mothers intentionally supported literacy events that linked to larger literacy and cultural practices of creating communities, supporting their children's development, and striving for a positive perspective on life.

This study leaves us wanting to know more. Specifically, we want to learn more about the relationship between the talk about school as a place for performance and the increasing demand for school accountability. We want to extend our work to shelters that are religiously affiliated as well those that are short term (1 night to 30 days). Moreover, we want to examine more closely the role of culture, ethnicity, and class in the literacy practices of families living in shelters.

Reflections: Libraries, Churches, Schools, and Shelters as Institutions

Our article looks at the three institutions of libraries, churches, and schools through the lens of women and children living in a homeless shelter. A sociocultural analysis enables an examination of the shelter as a way station influencing residents' literacy events in different ways. First, the physical space of the shelter, such as private rooms for families and a shared living space, influenced mothers and children's awareness of each others' reading

and writing practices, and mothers reported a decrease in keeping journals due to the lack of privacy. The shelter's lack of storage space made it difficult to keep many books as well as previous schoolwork and records. Along with the physical space, the mandated regimen and structure of the shelter impacted literacy activities. Required attendance in evening programs for the mothers and assigned chores cut down on time to review homework. By definition, shelters are filled with families in extreme crisis living with strangers in the same turmoil. This, at times, caused tension and made concentration difficult for both mothers and children.

In contrast, some children made friends to talk to about homework and books, as captured in the above examples of talk around the Bible and the retelling of a chapter from a book. For one child, school homework was a fact of school life regardless of living arrangements and, accordingly, she focused on completing her assignments. The shelter was a transitional residence in which women were searching for a place to call home, in the midst of continuing education, looking for a decent job, raising children, establishing good credit, and living by others' rules. The physical layout, the rules, and the interpersonal dynamics shaped families' literacy events, but it did not prevent the links to meaningful literacy practices of valuing learning and community.

In our interactions with mothers, children, and shelter staff, libraries, churches, and schools were all tacitly referred to as learning institutions. The women and children talked about them in terms of learning to be a reader for multiple reasons, including for pleasure, to bond with God, and to achieve academically. The public neighborhood library was a powerful institution for the mothers and children that offered community and safety. Mothers and children talked of the library as a place that offered respite from their current stresses. Interestingly, it was not about a single library but rather the institution in general that offered comfort as well as resources. The physical layout and routines were familiar and predictable. Book-lined walls, the quiet, the comfortable places to read, and free activities for mothers and children are common features to all libraries. Although proof of residence is required, mothers found using shelters' addresses relatively easy. No mothers complained of this necessity, and in fact, considered it an inclusive institution. The library did not demand tedious paperwork or commitments for the future, in contrast to many after-school programs. In the library, mothers and children explored their relationships with texts as well as their relationship to each other and the larger world.

Church was a sacred community space where people could convene once a week and where fellow members showed their support for families in this study by offering transportation to and from church. However, beyond the

walls of the building, the mothers and children extended the literacy practices through ongoing interactions with and around the Bible. The talk surrounding church was about clear expectations and commitment, and these were cradled in the relationships of children to mothers, church members, and believers in God. As documented in other studies of family literacy (see Farr & Guerra, 1995; Heath, 1983; MacGillivray, 2010), the church-related literacy links in powerful ways to cultural practices of connecting with others who are hopeful about the future and positioning oneself as a learner. In this case, interactions were text driven as the Bible was central.

School was a place where homelessness was rarely discussed; as is the case with many poor families, the disconnect between their lives and the school curriculum seemed to be accepted if not expected (Aguilar et al., 2003; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Valdes, 1996). Despite the potential for school to be a place of positive social connections, sadly, for these children it was a place where relationships were fractured by the transience of homelessness. Mothers talked about their efforts to keep their children in school and to avoid school moves, especially during the school year, but this was often too difficult for them due to the mitigating circumstances of homelessness.

Some mothers chose to have their children enrolled in the after-school programs because they themselves were in school or looking for work, but the parents still remained engaged in their children's education. Mothers talked about the quality and quantity of their children's homework. Most of the children in this study attended a school near the shelter; this shared affiliation provided the potential for friends who were in the same living situation as well as classmates who could help with homework. Although schools can make attendance difficult for children without homes by requiring proof of residency and not having access to children's current academic records, this school had a relationship with the shelter, which simplified paperwork. A structure was in place for the school and shelter to be in touch with each other, but the current case workers were not aware of this option. Personnel changes at both institutions make these kinds of arrangements more difficult. Thus, the location of schools, the after-school programs, and the quality of teachers were most important to the mothers in this study.

Looking Forward

Three primary implications result from this research. First, institutions across domains shape and often suppress literacy events yet do not necessarily prevent links to larger literacy practices. Second, library attendance and religious practice can support and energize literacy development as well as provide

an opportunity to connect with text in deeply personal and meaningful ways. In contrast, the talk of school reading as something that is "done" and evaluated provides a cause for concern. Third and most hopeful is the notion that although parents and children talked in different ways about school literacy, it was still positive; parents and children prioritized school success. This study helped us to see that in the midst of chaos, homeless mothers and children can come together across institutions and through literacy practices create communities of hope, strengthen family bonds, and establish the belief that literacy is a vehicle for success.

Author's Note

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