

Bringing the Housing Crisis Home: Novels Featuring Students Who Are Homeless

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The authors' analysis of nine children's novels reveals how barriers to academic success and perceptions of students who are homeless are complicated by social inequities and the neoliberal discourse.

The thing people don't know, until they've been there themselves, is how tiring it is to be homeless. It's always heavy on you.... It makes you look down when you walk. You've got to work hard at looking up. (Sugar in Bauer, 2012, p. 76)

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, students who are homeless are likely to be found in any classroom, in any library, or in any community, because the recession that followed the 2008 mortgage crisis forced many formerly housed families out of their homes at a rate unprecedented since the Great Depression (Wynne et al., 2014). During the 2013–2014 school year, more than 1.3 million homeless students attended public schools, and the total number of homeless Americans increased in 2017 for the first time since 2010 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHC], 2016). Despite the single-male-as-homeless stereotype, families with children comprised 35% of the homeless population in 2016, and nearly 60% of homeless family members were of school age (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). Thus, schools, libraries, and social service organizations in all types of communities play a role in meeting the needs of homeless children.

Societal processes such as poverty, unemployment, and the dearth of affordable housing are the leading causes of homelessness (Grineski, 2014; Rahman, Turner, & Elbedour, 2015). According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, “A full-time worker earning the minimum wage needs to work 117 hours per week for all 52 weeks of the year to afford a two-bedroom rental home or 94.5 hours per week for a one-bedroom rental home” (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, Errico, & Pang, 2017, p. 1). In 2012, 23% of American children lived in poverty, children whose families are essentially priced out of rental markets. The cost of health care, inadequate education, the tight job market and low wages, domestic violence, incarceration, mental illness, and substance abuse exacerbate homelessness (Grineski, 2014; Rahman, Turner, & Elbedour, 2015). Institutionalized discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation result in inordinate rates of homelessness among people of marginalized groups (Grineski, 2014; Rahman, Turner, & Elbedour, 2015).

When students become homeless, their withdrawal from school is typically “abrupt and unplanned,” unlike students whose move is “stable or upward” (Miller, Pavlakis, Samartino, & Bourgeois, 2015, p. 732). Homeless students' high rates of school mobility result in higher

absenteeism, lower test scores and grades, school behavior problems, increased rates of grade retention, and an increased risk of dropping out of school (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; NAEHC, 2016). In addition, institutional barriers to academic success, such as inadequate transportation, inflexible residency requirements, missing records, and ambiguous guardianship are daily realities for those who are homeless. Students also experience challenges of a more personal nature, such as fatigue, poor nutrition, inadequate clothing, difficulty concentrating, and the inability to complete assignments due to a lack of materials or a place to study (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Mohan & Shields, 2014; Rahman, Turner, & Elbedour, 2015).

Shamed by negative stereotypes, students often do not disclose their homeless status; they fear teachers will betray their confidence (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Wynne et al., 2014). Although being unusually tired, having poor hygiene, hoarding food, or repeatedly wearing the same clothes may signal that a student is homeless, students become so adept at compensating that their homelessness becomes “easily invisible in school” (Kim, 2013, p. 166). According to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, it is incumbent upon students or their parents to disclose their homeless status in order to receive mandated support (NAEHC, 2016; Wynne et al., 2014). When students hide their homelessness, when it becomes “invisible,” they too often do not receive the support to which they are entitled.

The loss of stable housing is a source of psychological trauma, and the recent high rates of family homelessness place many children at risk. Eviction, and the homelessness that frequently follows it, cause trauma through constant stressors such as vulnerability, unpredictability, hunger, and loss of agency (Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018; Dutro, 2008; Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991). Family members are separated, and the social bonds that exist within neighborhoods and in schools are disrupted when families lose their housing, all of which lead to the trauma of disassociation. Children’s feelings of shame and the belief that no help exists undermine their ability to trust and to feel safe, and they may develop a sense of helplessness “when they lose the belief that their own actions can influence the course of their lives” (Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991, p. 1221). Psychological trauma has a direct impact on a child’s ability to engage in school, yet positive and supportive relationships with parents, other caregivers, and teachers may ameliorate its impact by fostering emotional security, increasing self-esteem, and reestablishing a sense of connectedness (Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018; Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991; Herbers, Cutuli, Monn, Narayan, & Masten, 2014).

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Since the 1990s, the shifting political climate has given rise to the neoliberal discourse about homelessness. This discourse ascribes being poor to a lack of individual effort, while attributing success to initiative and hard work; it blames individuals for being homeless without considering the impact of institutionalized social inequities (Rogers & Marshall, 2012). Those without stable housing are stigmatized as inferior or simply lazy. This deficit view fosters an us-versus-them mentality, which emphasizes the individual’s responsibility while essentially erasing the collective responsibility for structural inequities and social processes that contribute to homelessness (Bechnel, 2013; Kim, 2013).

Kim (2013) and Grineski (2014) found that many preservice teachers hold biased beliefs regarding students who are homeless. Kim (2013) found that preservice teachers did not understand the varied living situations that constitute homelessness: living doubled-up with friends or family members; living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, camping grounds, emergency shelters, or transitional shelters; or living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, or bus or train stations (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Preservice teachers also “believed that homeless children were messy, chaotic, and dysfunctional” (Kim, 2013, p. 167), with parents who are disengaged. Similarly, Grineski (2014) found that many preservice teachers “had been socialized to think about children who are homeless as facing great struggles without help from their families who were thought to be cheating the system” (p. 209). Such deficit views foster discriminatory teacher interactions with homeless students. Recognizing that homelessness is a temporary situation rather than a permanent identity, that no two students experience homelessness in the same way, and that students who are homeless display “varied interests, gifts, and talents” (Grineski, 2014, p. 210) may disrupt this deficit view.

The foregoing discussion of the current state of homelessness in the United States, the barriers and challenges students who are homeless face, and the prevailing neoliberal construction of homelessness provide the situational context for this study and the discourse within which the novels we analyzed were written. We initiated this study with the complex nature of homelessness in mind. Because literature is written through a “particular lens” (Enriquez & Shulman-Kumin, 2014, p. 16), promotes

“a certain *version* of reality” (Apol, 1998, p. 34), and “uphold[s] certain kinds of truths” (Rogers & Marshall, 2012, p. 725), we wanted to ascertain how these novels represent homelessness—to consider the cultural values they convey and in what ways they interrupt or perpetuate the prevailing neoliberal discourse.

Methods

Identity matters in qualitative research, and we recognize that our identities shaped all aspects of this study (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Both of us are White, middle class, former upper elementary teachers who are now involved in education at the post-secondary level. Linda taught in a suburban district, and Clara taught in a rural setting. Although neither of us has personally experienced homelessness, we have both taught students who were homeless in our elementary and in our post-secondary classrooms and have witnessed the barriers they encounter. We were curious about the messages conveyed in contemporary realistic fiction featuring family homelessness and how those messages might shape readers’ understandings of homelessness as a personal or as a social issue. We believe children’s literature conveys cultural values and that revealing, describing, and analyzing its messages is a political act (Apol, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lewis, 2000). Thus, our overarching question for this study was this: How is family homelessness constructed in a text set of middle-grade, contemporary, realistic fiction novels?

Our backgrounds in upper elementary education led us to focus on novels for intermediate-grade and middle school readers, and the recession that began in 2008, leaving so many formerly housed families homeless, prompted us to select novels published after 2008. Thus, the parameters for the text set were (a) novels featuring family homelessness, (b) copyright dates of 2008 or later, and (c) novels recommended for readers in Grades 5 through 8. We relied first on our personal knowledge of children’s literature and then carefully searched the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database and reviews in Booklist Online. We identified a total of nine novels that fit our parameters. Although there are no clear guidelines regarding the size of a text set in qualitative research, we believe these novels yield meaningful and reliable data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Short, 2017).

Krippendorff (2004) stated the importance of the “systematic reading of a body of texts” (p. 3) in qualitative content analysis. To that end, we independently read through each novel twice. Short (2017) emphasized the importance of first reading “as a reader, rather than as a researcher to experience the whole before... analyzing the parts” (p. 8). Therefore, we first read each

novel to simply experience it. We approached our second readings through a social class lens (Appleman, 2015). Appleman introduced the term *social class lens* to do the work of and expand Marxist theory, and to avoid conflating Marxist *literary* theory and Marxist *political* theory. A social class lens “invite[s] us to consider the kinds of prevailing ideologies that construct the social realities in which we participate” (Appleman, 2015, p. 54). This lens is particularly appropriate when considering the neoliberal discourse—that is, in teasing out individual versus collective responsibility. Thus, we read through a social lens to consider not only the experience of homelessness but also which socioeconomic inequities contribute to and complicate it.

We drew on the work of Appleman (2015), Bressler (2007), Rogers and Marshall (2012), and Tyson (2006) to articulate the following guiding questions that focused our second readings:

1. How does the family become homeless? Is there evidence of institutionalized inequities that contribute to the family’s loss of housing?
2. What do we learn about living homeless? Is there evidence of systematic social inequalities, particularly those related to class structure, that complicate the lives of those who are homeless?
3. How are people who are homeless portrayed? In what ways do the portrayals perpetuate or disrupt the neoliberal view of those who are homeless?

During our second reading, we identified specific excerpts pertaining to our guiding questions. These data excerpts constituted the units of analysis and were as “discrete as possible while retaining fidelity to the integrity of the whole” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 565). Our guiding questions delimited what we noted as significant (Apol, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000).

We coded the data excerpts after our second readings. Our initial codes broadly named the aspect of homelessness described in the data. This initial coding necessitated that we pay close attention to the data, work with ambiguous initial codes, and tolerate “confusion and regression” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 599). The second round of focused, constant comparison coding was an iterative process through which we established cohesive, relevant categories, which we subsequently arranged in themes (Charmaz, 2006; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Short, 2017). We returned to the novels a third time to confirm that our interpretation of the excerpts maintained their integrity in relation to the context of the novel.

Because our guiding questions yielded extensive and far-ranging themes and associated categories, we

focused this article on only those aspects that relate specifically to the child characters as students. We identified structural obstacles and personal challenges student characters face when they are homeless: absenteeism, school transportation, academic performance, and hunger. We assigned these categories to the theme “barriers to academic success.” We noted that child characters in this text set experienced a shift in their self-concept as homelessness became the defining aspect of their identity. In addition, some of the characters’ peers supported them while others ostracized them, and some school personnel supported them while

others seemed insensitive to or uncomfortable with their homelessness. The theme “perceptions of the homeless” comprises the categories of (a) self- and peer perceptions and (b) teacher perceptions. We articulated the complex intersections of institutional processes and social class that complicate and contribute to homelessness in an attempt to understand the personal versus the structural in these portrayals. We believe it is at this juncture that the portrayals both resist and perpetuate the neoliberal construction of the homeless. Table 1 details information about each novel and the impact of homelessness as it relates to the child character as a student.

TABLE 1
Novels Included in the Text Set

Book Title	Characters (Grade Level)	Housing Situation	Impact on Student	
<i>Almost Home</i> Bauer, 2012	Sugar (6th) Reba	Double up with family Homeless shelter Foster care	School transportation Academic performance Hunger Hygiene concerns	Experiences shame Hides homelessness Bullied at school
<i>Also Known as Harper</i> Leal, 2009	Harper Lee (5th) Hemingway (K) Mama	Motel Abandoned drive-in theater	Absenteeism School transportation Academic performance Hunger	Hygiene concerns Experiences shame Hides homelessness
<i>Body of Water</i> Dooley, 2011	Ember (6th & 7th) Ivy (1st & 2nd) Isaac (college) Elijah	Campground	School transportation Academic performance Hunger Hygiene concerns	Experiences shame Hides homelessness Bullied at school
<i>Crenshaw</i> Applegate, 2015	Jackson (5th) Robin (preschool) Thomas Sara	Apartment Van	Hunger Hygiene concerns	Experiences shame Hides homelessness
<i>Hold Fast</i> Balliett, 2013	Early (5th) Jubilation (preschool) Dashel Summer	Homeless shelter	Absenteeism School transportation Hunger	Hygiene concerns Experiences shame Bullied at school
<i>How to Steal a Dog</i> O'Connor, 2009	Georgina (late elementary) Toby (early elementary) Mama	Car Abandoned house Double up with a friend	Academic performance Hunger Hygiene concerns	Experiences shame Hides homelessness Bullied at school
<i>Paper Things</i> Jacobson, 2015	Arianna (5th) Gage Janna	Double up with friends Homeless shelter Storage unit	School transportation Academic performance Hunger Hygiene concerns	Experiences shame Hides homelessness Bullied at school
<i>Tinfoil Sky</i> Sand-Eveland, 2012	Melody, “Mel” (7th) Cecily Gladys	Car Double up with boyfriend Double up with Grandma	Absenteeism School transportation Hunger	Hygiene concerns Experiences shame Hides homelessness
<i>Towers Falling</i> Rhodes, 2016	Dèja (5th) Raymond (preschool) Leda (toddler) Jim, “Pop” Bea, “Ma”	Homeless shelter	Hunger Hygiene concerns	Experiences shame

Barriers to Academic Success

I'd never put one thought into getting myself to school before.... I just got up and went. How did it ever get so mixed up? (Harper Lee in Leal, 2009, pp. 171–172)

Across the novels, characters face barriers to their academic success that arise when they lose the stability of permanent housing. These barriers are often directly related to institutional systems and structures that privilege those with financial means and disadvantage those without, and they result in absenteeism, inadequate school transportation, falling academic performance, and hunger. Getting to school takes much longer and is more complicated for Sugar, Mel, Ember, Harper, and Arianna after they become homeless, leading to absenteeism and less time to complete homework. Sugar, Harper, Early, Georgina, Arianna, Mel, and Dèja are dedicated, high-performing students prior to losing their housing, and their falling academic performance is an additional source of shame and stress. Every one of the characters experiences hunger.

ABSENTEEISM

Each of these homeless characters *wants* to attend school, but the turmoil of moving abruptly, the lack of adequate transportation, assuming increased responsibility for siblings, or parents working long hours to provide for their children contribute to their absenteeism. Most of the characters with high absenteeism are kept out of school because their parents have no choice but to do so. The students' absenteeism is not a personal failing but stems from social inequities related to poverty.

In *Also Known as Harper* (Leal, 2009), Harper Lee is a fifth grader whose family is evicted from their rented home. Harper's younger brother is unable to attend half-day kindergarten because their mother's multiple jobs make it impossible for her to pick him up, and she cannot afford child care. Although Harper dreams of entering the school's poetry-reading contest, she must miss school to watch Hem, and she wonders if she will ever be able to return. Harper tells a friend that her mother "knows I'm good at taking care of things.... But I think she forgets I can't be doing it all the time" (p. 159).

In *A Tinfoil Sky* (Sand-Eveland, 2012), Melody and her alcoholic mother have repeatedly experienced homelessness and housing instability. Melody resentfully thinks about "one of the few times...when she began and finished a school year in the same class" (p. 38). To avoid living on the streets or in a shelter, they move in with her mother's abusive boyfriend, resulting in an hour-long bus ride to school for Melody. Her mother decides that it would be easier for Melody to simply stop going to school and enroll

in a new school the next fall since there are "only a couple of months left in the year" (p. 64).

These students' absenteeism may be traced directly to social structures that inadequately support those living in poverty. The fact that Harper's mother works multiple jobs and still cannot afford stable housing, and the fact that Mel and her mother's only viable options are living on the street, in a shelter, or with an abusive boyfriend reflects the dearth of housing options for the poor. Furthermore, half-day kindergarten disadvantages working class poor families. Harper's mother's only option is to rely on Harper to care for her younger brother. The neoliberal discourse may be challenged by recognizing that inequitable social processes, rather than personal failings, contributed to these young people's school absences. On the other hand, it seems to be upheld by the portrayal of Mel's mother as an alcoholic. Mel views her mother's struggle as a personal failing rather than as an illness or a social condition, perpetuating a deficit view of those who are homeless.

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION

Closely related to absenteeism, finding reliable and reasonable transportation to school becomes extremely difficult when these characters lose permanent housing. The families' poverty combined with inadequate transportation options exacerbate the logistics of attending school. Their difficulties also point to the limitations of federal mandates regarding school-provided transportation for students who are homeless.

In *Body of Water* (Dooley, 2011), Ember's family moves to a campground at the edge of town after their trailer home burns down, and the family becomes homeless, careless, and jobless. Ember and her sister pay to ride a public bus to their grandmother's apartment, where they catch their respective school buses. They must take the earliest bus in order to catch the school bus on time. One day the girls miss the public bus and, consequently, their school buses. Determined to get to school, Ember first accompanies her sister to her elementary school and then walks to her middle school in shoes that are painfully small.

Sugar and her mother move in with a cousin after their eviction in *Almost Home* (Bauer, 2012). Moving outside the district means Sugar has to take two extra buses to get to school. Her mother tells her not to tell anyone, so Sugar lies about where she lives and "hate[s] lying" (p. 58). When Sugar and her mother move to a homeless shelter even farther away, she enrolls in a new school. She is broken-hearted that she must leave her teachers and friends, and her grades plummet.

Ember's and Sugar's situations highlight the inadequacies of federal legislation mandating that schools provide transportation for students who are homeless

regardless of where they temporarily reside and that they must be able to remain in the school they attended prior to becoming homeless. Parents or students must notify the school of their housing situation, but families do not do so for many reasons. Ember's parents feared social services would remove the children from their custody if they learned the family was living in a campground. Sugar's situation, having no shelter available within her school district, points to the lack of temporary housing for those who become homeless. The fact that these children worked so hard to get to school counters a deficit view.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Stress that results from being homeless has a negative impact on students' academic performance. The majority of the characters in these novels value education and strive to overcome the obstacles resulting from their homeless status and to achieve academic success. Most of the parents have high expectations for their children and want them to perform well, yet the unpredictability of their lives due to the lack of temporary housing options, subsequent inadequate study facilities, and lack of materials has negative impacts on these students' academic performance.

Georgina and her brother try to complete their homework while living in their car in *How to Steal a Dog* (O'Connor, 2009). "They huddled together in the front seat with the flashlight propped up on the dashboard" (p. 68). Unlike her peers who use home computers and the library to write an assigned report, Georgina makes up a report that lasts "about two seconds" (p. 56) when she reads it aloud. Her peers laugh at her, reinforcing her shame regarding her falling academic performance. Georgina's work continues to deteriorate, and her teacher questions her about her bad attitude and lack of effort. She tells him everything is fine, even as she thinks that her father left the family, her mother cannot afford a place to live, she lost all her possessions when they were evicted, and her best friend no longer likes her.

In *Paper Things* (Jacobson, 2015), Ari's school performance spirals downward after she becomes homeless. An outstanding student, she is in the process of applying to a school for the gifted. However, with the unpredictability of finding a place to sleep and something to eat, Ari goes from being an excellent student to a struggling one. After spending an evening trekking across the city, Ari is too tired to do homework when she and her brother finally find a place to sleep. On a different night, she inadvertently leaves her books behind when they leave one apartment to stay in another. She says: "It's not until we've actually reached Brigg's apartment in the West End...that I remember. I left the library books. The books we took out tonight. The books I absolutely need for my outline" (p. 46).

These students' falling academic performance results from multiple social inequities directly related to being poor and homeless. From their use of public libraries to their attempts to study in cars, their struggle to be academically successful disrupts the neoliberal discourse. These students cannot count on homework supports more affluent families take for granted; more accessible after-school, library, or community center study spaces with school supplies would have enabled them to complete assignments. The lack of appropriate housing options for those living in poverty also contributes to their academic difficulties. Georgina hides her homelessness, reflecting an internalized deficit view, and her teacher blames her falling grades on her poor attitude and lack of effort rather than looking more deeply for possible causes.

HUNGER

Hunger is an ever-present theme in several of the novels. Poverty and homelessness mean the characters eat the cheapest foods they can find. Several of these characters rely on their schools for nutritious food, and these portrayals emphasize the important role schools play in feeding their hungry students. The characters' hunger interferes with their ability to concentrate and perform in school, thereby creating a barrier to their academic success.

Jackson is familiar with hunger in *Crenshaw* (Applegate, 2015) because his family has struggled financially for many years. He observes that Northern California is "a great place to find free food, if you know where to look" (p. 158): farmer's markets, grocery stores, and even a hardware store that gives away free popcorn. There is also free food at the community center food pantry, but Jackson's father "doesn't like to go there. He says he doesn't want to take food from people who really need it" (p. 159). Jackson also says it is "easier to be hungry in winter than in summer" (p. 158) because schools provide free breakfast, lunch, and after-school snacks.

Since Ember's family (Dooley, 2011) lives in a campground, they cannot refrigerate food, and it is also difficult for them to prepare it. Ember's situation reflects the dilemma of many who live in poverty. Fast food is cheap food, yet it is high in calories and lacks nutritional value. She says:

But the truth is that when you don't eat well, you get fatter, not slimmer. You eat what you can find even if it's bologna for days on end. Even if it's cheese and Little Debbie cakes and endless, endless, endless day-old pastries from the bakery section at the grocery store. Even if you know your diet is piling calories into your system, putting inches on your hips. You have to eat something, and the only something that is cheap is also fattening. (p. 200)

When school starts, their food situation becomes less dire because breakfast and lunch are free. Ember is appreciative of the food, yet the breakfast menu points to the importance of nutritious school meals: “It was as if the clouds parted and shone starlight down onto the limp French toast sticks” (p. 204).

The reluctance of Tom, Jackson’s father, to take advantage of a food pantry seems to indicate that he has internalized the neoliberal construction of the deserving and undeserving poor. He apparently cannot admit his family’s need and, perhaps, his inability to fulfill that need. Two of the young characters also resist taking advantage of free food. Ari is “shy and embarrassed” thinking people will believe she is “not really supposed” to get a free breakfast from her school cafeteria (Jacobson, 2015, p. 287), and although Mel’s only real meal of the day is at the Mission Soup Kitchen, she pulls the hood of her sweatshirt over her head to avoid being recognized. These characters embody an internalized, deficit view of those who are hungry and homeless, but their struggle pushes back at the neoliberal discourse. Ember’s situation reflects that of so many people living in food deserts in poor neighborhoods. Her struggle to get nutritious food reveals that she eats junk food because she *must*, not because she *wants* to.

Perceptions of the Homeless

I feel like I’ve got a sign across my forehead that everyone sees: HOMELESS GIRL. Maybe it’s just that I don’t like me. (Sugar in Bauer, 2012, pp. 74–75)

Being homeless causes these student characters to feel different from their peers, and they are frequently bullied. They feel as if they are not the person they once were; their identities shift from multifaceted to *homeless*. Ember, Jackson, Early, Georgina, Arianna, Sugar, Dèja, and Mel hide their homelessness out of shame and because of their parents’ warnings about possible social services interventions. Most of them fear, often rightly so, that their friends and teachers will turn against them, yet Jackson, Mel, and Dèja maintain supportive peer relationships after disclosing their homelessness. That many of these students cannot maintain the socially sanctioned standard of hygiene is another source of shame and of bullying. Teachers also play both negative and positive roles in these young people’s lives. Georgina and Ember have negative experiences because of their teachers’ perceptions of homeless students, while Sugar, Arianna, and Dèja’s teachers see them as children with multidimensional identities. Their teachers are sensitive to the nature of in-school and homework assignments, and they create inclusive classrooms. Neither Harper’s, Jackson’s, Early’s, or Mel’s relationships with school personnel are described.

SELF- AND PEER PERCEPTIONS

Dèja’s shame about her homeless status leads her to introduce herself by her first name only in *Towers Falling* (Rhodes, 2016). People in her old neighborhood witnessed their eviction; her brother cried, her sister clutched a raggedy doll, and she helped her mother and father “stuff what they could in [their] car and still have enough room for five of [them] to sleep” (pp. 14–15). Her best friend subsequently stops talking to her: “Like my family and me were just trash” (p. 3). When a friend asks her what she is going to do in the future, she thinks, “Since kindergarten, I’ve wanted to live in the biggest, best house in the whole world. But the house doesn’t matter. What matters is not feeling bad, less than somebody else” (p. 85).

It is hard for Early to make friends at her new school in *Hold Fast* (Balliett, 2013); she is bullied by a girl who hisses at her, “Stinkin’ shelter kids” (p. 123). The girl says her mother told her that shelter kids give the school a bad name. Early reflects, “Hiding the fact of homelessness was clearly best for peaceful survival in a classroom, but the idea felt nasty. Like losing your home was a dirty secret” (p. 200). She quickly understands why other students at the homeless shelter hate school: “It was hard enough to change schools and neighborhoods, but to leave everything familiar and then be labeled as one of the ‘shelter’ kids was doubly tough” (p. 200).

When Georgina’s best friend tells her that she is starting to look “unkempt,” Georgina muses, “It’s kinda hard to keep your clothes looking nice when you’ve been sleeping in the backseat of a Chevrolet for a week” (O’Connor, 2009, p. 4). On top of everything else, her “hairbrush got tossed out in that pile of stuff Mr. Deeter left on the sidewalk” (pp. 4–5) when he evicted her family. Without even rudimentary bathroom facilities and lacking the money to go to a laundromat, she and her family members wash themselves and their laundry in public restrooms and dry their clothes by hanging them out of their car windows.

Ari and her brother have no alarm to awaken them after his cell phone is disconnected. After running all the way to school, Ari overhears a mean girl asking Ari’s former friend, “Is Ari using some new product in her hair? Or is that...*grease*?” (Jacobson, 2015, p. 127). Ari muses, “It’s not much of a surprise that I don’t look—or smell—my best today. But I can’t very well explain the situation to Sasha and the others” (p. 130). Ari tries to hide her homelessness and maintain acceptable hygiene by sneaking in to the restroom in the mornings before school to change into clean clothes and wash her face and underarms with wet paper towels.

These characters are embedded in the neoliberal discourse, an invisible ideology that shapes their

self-concepts. They believe their homeless status makes them “less than” other people. Some of their peers deride them because of their lack of hygiene, yet readers know the lengths to which the students who are homeless go to be clean and presentable. These young people’s struggles with self-concept and the impact of others’ derision call attention to the ways the deficit view distorts the lived reality of these characters.

TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

Ember’s principal is visibly uncomfortable when he calls her to the office to “touch base” (Dooley, 2011, p. 251) and ask how her family is doing after the fire. He asks Ember if the school can help, and she silently stares down at her dirty, ill-fitting clothes, unable to tell him what she is going through. Her parents had warned her that she and her sister could be taken away from them if the school found out they were living in a campground. She tears up and lets “the silence stretch so long that Mr. Ross start[s] to fidget” (p. 251). He dismisses her when she does not respond, and she leaves his office “without ever speaking a single word” (p. 251).

The day after Sugar tells Mr. Bennett she knows this girl who lost her house, Mr. B. hands her an envelope containing information on famous people who have been homeless. On Sugar’s last day of school, she hugs him and “walk[s] away from the best man in America” (Bauer, 2012, p. 70). Mr. B. regularly emails her long after she leaves his class to offer encouragement and support. After he reads some poetry she writes about her struggles, he asks “if she’s in a safe place with people she can trust” (p. 137). His concern and support serve as an anchor during Sugar’s move out of state and into foster care.

Dèja’s teacher at her new school, Miss Garcia, offers sincere and concrete help and guidance. Dèja observes, “Miss Garcia [looks] at me—like she sees me, understands how hard things are for me” (Rhodes, 2016, p. 54). After asking students to write about and show where they live, she pulls Dèja aside and tells her she does not have to write about the homeless shelter but can “draw, create the space where [she] lived before” (p. 37). Dèja thinks, “Not writing about Avalon isn’t going to help me. Sooner or later kids will find out where I live” (p. 38). Miss Garcia’s kindness and understanding set the stage for other students’ friendships with Dèja, making her school experience and peer relationships positive.

School personnel who embody a deficit view attribute students’ difficulties to personal failings rather than to discriminatory structures within the school, and Mr. Ross is openly uncomfortable with Ember. On the other hand, teachers who support their homeless students subvert inequitable structures by providing alternative assignments and materials, establishing inclusive environments, keeping

in contact, and even providing clothing. As Dèja says, they truly “see” their students. Even supportive teachers, however, can subtly perpetuate neoliberal beliefs. Although Sugar is heartened by Mr. B.’s list of famous people who were homeless, the list implies that one might overcome structural inequities through personal effort and ingenuity, reinforcing the neoliberal construction of homelessness; those who remain homeless do so because of a “lack” within themselves. This was certainly not Mr. B.’s intent, but such is the nature of deep ideologies.

These novels provide realistic and rich representations of students experiencing homelessness, and they afford opportunities to critique the neoliberal discourse of homelessness with upper elementary and middle school readers.

Implications

The overview of family homelessness in the United States and our analysis of these novels revealed that the portrayals of student characters align with research documenting the barriers to academic success students who are homeless encounter and the impact of students’ own and others’ perceptions. These novels humanize the experience of homelessness through well-developed characters and rich and detailed descriptions of these children’s lives. Analyzing the portrayals through a social class lens (Appleman, 2015) revealed institutional processes and structures that disadvantage those who are homeless. These portrayals disrupt, and occasionally perpetuate, the neoliberal discourse that labels people who are homeless as inferior, lazy, unmotivated, and disinterested.

These novels provide realistic and rich representations of students experiencing homelessness, and they afford opportunities to critique the neoliberal discourse of homelessness with upper elementary and middle school readers. We believe it is important for readers to first live through these characters’ experiences, yet it is the movement from aesthetic response to critical engagement that promotes “reflection and transformation in the reader” (Cai, 2008, p. 218). While teachers cannot predict what texts will evoke deeply felt responses, we anticipate that *these* novels may be sites of tension for both housed and unhoused students. We suggest that engaging in literature discussions, taking on different perspectives, and analyzing language may foster reflection and critical engagement

for both housed and unhoused students and enable them to identify and question inequitable structures and processes that contribute to and complicate homelessness. The strategies we present below are not necessarily discrete but often combine aspects of discussion, perspective taking, and language analysis.

Reading and discussing novels like these provide opportunities for shaping and reshaping how students view themselves and the world around them. Discussions about difficult topics, such as homelessness, often result in expressions of exploratory thought and conflicting opinions (Möller, 2012). Asking students to respond from an “I’m-not-sure-about-this” stance rather than a “this-is-the-answer” stance (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 58) creates a safe environment for exploring new perspectives and ideas. Creating a safe environment also involves acknowledging the “weight and importance” (Dutro, 2008, p. 427) of readers’ testimonies of personal experience. Meaningful responses often take place unsolicited during the course of literature discussions, but questions that might create space for students’ thoughtful reflection include the following:

1. What experiences from your own life did this novel bring to mind?
2. What powerful image(s) from this novel stuck with you?
3. What did a character do that you would also do or that you would do differently?
4. What did the character who is homeless say about herself or himself (or what did another character say about him or her)? What motivated the character to say that? Is there anything you would like to say back to that character?
5. After reading the novel, what is your understanding of being homeless?
6. What did you hear someone else say about the novel that you agree or disagree with?

These questions provide space for follow-up questions that encourage students to consider and critique contributing societal structures and processes as well as negative stereotypes associated with being homeless.

Thein et al. (2007) found that beliefs transform slowly, but that a “powerful kind of change” occurs when students develop “an increased willingness to ‘try on’ different perspectives” (p. 55). In some classroom communities, alternative perspectives are silenced by the prevailing discourse, but purposefully “trying on” other perspectives helps disrupt this tendency. Similarly, viewing situations from other perspectives reveals personal biases and stereotypes and interrupts normalized perspectives (Möller, 2012; Pace & Townsend, 1999). Thought tracking (Farmer, 2011) is an activity wherein students assume the identity

of a character and, step by step, articulate the character’s thinking throughout an episode from the novel. In addition to viewing the event through the character’s perspective, this provides opportunities to explore the ways language, in the form of self-talk, shapes perceptions and motivations. It also provides an opportunity to explore the structural barriers the character encountered.

These novels highlight the ways language contributes to identity construction through the language other people direct toward those who are homeless and through the characters’ internal dialogue. Botelho and Rudman (2009) reminded us: “People use language to define and contest the reality they exist in. Language is where and how power is reproduced, distributed, and maintained” (p. 101). Through literature discussions and perspective taking, students may realize that language is not neutral and recognize how language shapes and is shaped by societal discourses (Behrman, 2006). An effective activity to examine how language constructs homelessness is discourse tagging (Rogers & Marshall, 2012), wherein readers view newspaper articles or news segments about homelessness alongside reading novels. Purposeful, intertextual comparisons that juxtapose competing discourses of homelessness provide the opportunity to “tag” language that supports or counters the neoliberal view of homelessness, making visible the ways language shapes perceptions.

When looking at homelessness through the lens of social class, myriad implications arise that extend well beyond the classroom. These include major efforts such as the need for expanded affordable housing for families living in poverty as well as more options for temporary housing and expanded transportation systems to enable students to attend school with greater access to federally mandated, school-provided supports. A social class lens also reveals the need for local initiatives such as more full-day kindergartens; affordable, quality child care; and before- and after-school homework centers in schools, libraries, and community centers. This analysis also points to the need for greater access to nutritious foods. We know anecdotally that select schools, universities, and public libraries in our community provide free food not only during the school year but during the summer months as well. Most important, our findings point to the insidious nature of the neoliberal construction of those who are homeless and the need to replace it with a discourse of social justice.

Conclusion

These novels highlight the barriers to academic success homeless students encounter, the shifts in the characters’ self-perceptions and the ways others view them, and student–teacher relationships that are both cautionary and exemplary. As is the case with many homeless

students, most of these student characters do not receive appropriate support because they do not disclose their homeless status and are often adept at hiding their homelessness. They experience anxiety and shame because of the negative stereotypes and stressors associated with being homeless. Yet these characters are not constructed as the “undeserving poor” but rather as determined and resilient. Banks (2016) emphasizes that engagement with “powerful concepts and social issues” (p. 191) transforms thinking and perception. We believe engagement with and a social class critique of these novels may be a starting point for students who are silently struggling with being homeless, for housed students, and for teachers to deconstruct the neoliberal discourse of homelessness and begin to reconstruct homelessness as an issue of social justice. We conclude with Ari’s reflection on being homeless (Jacobson, 2015):

I know what it’s like to be an outsider, to feel like you don’t belong. For six weeks, my brother and I were, well, homeless. We slept on couches and at the shelter and even in a car. We did the best we could, but my grades still suffered, and I even lost my best friend because of it. Because I was too embarrassed to tell anyone what was really going on. Because I didn’t want to be different. (p. 336) ■

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