The Multi-dimensional Lives of Children who are Homeless

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Abstract

It is widely reported that children who are homeless are victimized by overwhelming challenges like poverty and ill-advised policy decisions, such as underfunding the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This act is the only federal legislation devoted to this marginalized group. Children who are homeless, however, should not be characterized as single-dimensional and hapless victims solely defined by this unwanted status. This kind of deficiency-thinking leads to presumptions, generalizations, and a narrow ascribing of not just their abilities, but their full humanity as well. Deficit-thinking may cause human service providers to try and 'fix and manage' children who are homeless, instead of building on their interests, gifts, and talents. Viewing children who are homeless as multi-dimensional and unfinished, with "hopes, dreams, and aspirations...passions and commitments... [and] skills, abilities, and capacities..."[1] should be the reality for the more than one million children who are homeless. This manuscript provides a richer understanding for the multi-dimensional lives of children who are homeless. Interviews conducted with key stakeholders and surveys completed by children staying at an emergency homeless shelter located in a Midwestern mid-size city inform preliminary ethnographic findings presented here. Generated from a two-year community- and shelter-based activity program these findings push back against a narrowing social construction of children who are homeless, as do several studies investigating this idea. A more holistic narrative that illustrates multi-dimensional children who act on varied interests, gifts, and talents are suggested.

Keywords: *homelessness, children, deficit-and asset-based thinking, public policy, ethnographic findings*

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1. William Ayers, "Popular Education: Teaching for Social Justice," in *Teaching for Social Justice*, eds. William Ayers and Jean Ann Hunt (New York: The New Press Teachers College Press, 1998), xvii.

At our local emergency homeless shelter one evening, Mithson, a 14 year-old Haitian-American young man, told me. "You know Steve, it's not fair for kids like me...you know poor kids, we just don't get the same opportunities as other kids." And later during another conversation, Mithson elaborated on his interests with 20th century American history: "I am really interested in the Civil Rights Movement, the 1968 Olympics, black athletes, and Mohammed Ali." Completing college so he can manage and then own a N.B.A. team is his life goal—"there should be more owners of color, he told me." Once I asked, 'if I asked your teachers about you, what would they tell me?' Without missing a beat Mithson said, 'He is really quiet." This young man speaks three languages: English, Creole, and French.

The Social Context of Homelessness: Reasons and Challenges

In their *America's Youngest Outcasts* report, The National Center on Family Homelessness questioned whether America really cares about its children: "Children define our future and therefore, lay claim to our nation's consciences, but little attention has been given to the tragic plight of more than 1.5 million children without homes."[2] Meritocracy, a mistaken belief held by many conservative policy makers, makes maintaining, let alone expanding, federal initiatives to end child homelessness, difficult.[3] This lack of attention makes living in America an exhausting struggle for the many children who make up the poorest sub-group in the country as large numbers of children lack adequate food, healthcare and stable housing. Children who are homeless have been continually identified as the fastest growing segment of the homeless population for nearly 25 years.[4] Caring about and believing in these children, coupled with appropriate support services, and an authentic commitment to providing stable housing when there is *nowhere to go* is critical because…"homeless children are the most vulnerable of all homeless people."[5]Although these young people are indeed vulnerable and presented with many challenges, unemployment and homelessness are not inevitable life-trajectories as evidenced by Mithson's academic and career goals.

Reasons

Reasons for homelessness are wide-ranging and complicated. Unfortunately these reasons resulted in over 600,000 individuals identified as homeless on a given night in 2013, with nearly

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2. National Center on Family Homelessness, "America's Youngest Outcasts," 2010, accessed January 6, 2014, http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org.

3. Joel Spring defines meritocracy as "each individual's social and occupational position [being] determined by merit, not political or economic influence." A belief in meritocracy would hold that being homeless and poor results from an individual's lack of effort and accompanying inability to secure housing. As a result, these individuals are not worthy of assistance. See *The American School: a Global Context from the Puritans to the Obama Era (5th ed)* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2011), 271.

4. Jerome Becker and Nancy Boxill, *Homeless Children: the Watchers and the Waiter* (Philadelphia, PA: Haworth Press, 1990).

5. Martha Burt, Laudan Aron, Pamela Lee, and Jesse Valenti, *Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing?* (Washington, DC : The Urban Institute, 2001), 137.

25% under the age of 18.[6] However, when considering other sleeping options, numbers of individuals identified as homeless skyrockets to the millions.[7] As one would guess poverty leads unemployment and lack of affordable housing as the three uppermost reasons for family homelessness. Currently, 1 in 5 or 16.1 million children live in poverty.[8] In 2010, almost one-third of Hispanic, African-American, American Indian, and Alaska Native families with children faced poverty on a daily basis—three times the rate of white families.[9] Children who are homeless are disproportionately residing in female-headed households with 80% of homeless families led by single women.[10]

Whenever the economy falters, unemployment, reduced work hours, pay cuts, and diminished benefits contribute to families struggling with housing stability. When nearly half of employed individuals who are homeless cannot afford housing, securing housing without a job is nearly impossible.[11] Unemployment and low-wage jobs not offering health care and retirement plans serve to exhaust human and financial resources as families strain under the burden of housing instability.

Lack of affordable housing is another key reason why many families are pushed into homelessness as witnessed during the 2008 recession. Mounting numbers of people in poverty, decreasing federal housing support, and rising costs explain the scarcity of affordable housing options today. As a result over one-half of households carried the label of being *cost-burdened* (i.e., spending 30% of income or more on housing costs) in 2013 while nearly 30% were saddled with the hardships of *severe cost-burden* (i.e., spending 50% of income or more on housing costs).[12] Securing affordable housing is made even more difficult by the color of one's skin as families of color continue to battle for meaningful employment that pays a living age.[13]

President Harry S. Truman signed into law the 1949 National Housing Act in hopes of remedying the mid-20th century housing crisis.[14] The overall goal was to create "...a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family."[15] Currently, 5.8 million housing units are needed to house the country's low-income families.[16] Lack of health care, inadequate education, domestic violence, incarceration, mental illness, and substance abuse are additional reasons for family homelessness. The debilitating effects of racial, gender, sexual orientation, and income discrimination cannot be discounted as factors contributing to family homelessness.[17]

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6. *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013).

7. *State of Homelessness in America* (New York: National Alliance to End Homelessness, Homeless Research Institute, 2012).

8. *The American Almanac of Family Homelessness* (New York: Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2013).

9. Ibid.

10. US Interagency Council on Homelessness, "Family Homelessness,"accessed May 5, 2014, http://www.usich.giov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_FamHomeless_Facts_internal.pdf.

11. National Coalition for the Homeless, "Employment and Homelessness," accessed January 30, 2014, http://www.nationalhomelessness.org/factsheets/employment.html.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. US Department of Housing and Urban Development, "HUD Historical Background, Homes and Communities, 1940s," accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.hud.gov/offices/adm/about/admguide'history.cfm.

15. Ibid.

16. National Center on Family Homelessness, "The Character and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness," accessed August 14, 2014, http://www. familyhomelessness.org.

17. Joseph Tobin and Kerri Murphy, *Homelessness Comes to School* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 2011).

Challenges

Children who are homeless are well-acquainted with the challenges caused by housing instability. Nevertheless, how each child responds is dependent upon variables such as level of resiliency, gender, age, available resources, familial and outsider support, current living circumstances, amount of mobility, reasons for homelessness, and length of time and frequency of homeless episodes. As a result of how children respond, some successfully overcome these challenges.[18] These challenges, documented for over 20 years began with Ellen Bassuk and Lenore Rubin who pioneered research efforts to understand the challenges homelessness presented to children. [19] In her initial study, depression and anxiety were identified as mental-health risks associated with school-age children staying in shelters. Karol Reganick described the challenges children face due to homelessness: physical and health problems, such as poor nutrition; social problems, including poor social skills, insecurities and self-consciousness about high mobility and living in poverty; marginalization and trauma from psychological stressors associated with homelessness; and developmental delays caused by lack of intellectual stimulation.[20] Feeling welcomed and experiencing success within school walls is yet another challenge presented to children who are homeless.

Educational success is a life-altering outcome shaped by homelessness. Unfortunately for many children, it is often negatively shaped by variables beyond their control. Enrollment requirements, inadequate funding, and prejudice and discrimination are some reasons students who are homeless face obstacles to fair and equal schooling.[21] Changing schools, poor attendance, unnecessary special education placements, poor academic performance, grade retention, and high drop-out rates characterize the education experienced by some students who are homeless. Government policies such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and HeadStart, intended to provide equal education opportunities and protect the educational rights of these students, can make schooling a more positive experience. Regrettably these policies, desperately needed by many children, fall short of their full reach. This is readily evident through ongoing underfunding of the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act and the significant under-serving (80%+) by Head Start of preschoolers who are homeless.[22]

A good deal of literature reporting on the life trajectories of children who are homeless foretells predictable and hopeless journeys to adulthood.[23] Social Work Professor Paul Shane's writings embody this deficit-based perspective: "A macro effect of homelessness on children is...that they are cast out and lost from society...They don't belong anywhere. They then become potentially damaged members of society that may become dependent upon and/or prey upon so-

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    18.   Karol Reganick, "Prognosis for Homeless Children and Adolescents," *Childhood Education* 73, no. 3 (1997): 133-135.

    19.   See for an example of this work Julee Kryder-Coe and Lester Salamon and Janice Molnar, *Children and Youth: a New American Dilemma* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1991); Ellen Bassuk and Lenore Rubin, "Homeless Children: A Neglected Population," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 57 (1987): 279-286.

    20.   Reganick. "Prognosis for Homeless Children and Adolescents": 133-135.

    21.   Ohio Legal Services, "Education Rights of Homeless Students," accessed February 10, 2014, http://www. ohiolegalservices.org/public/legal.../students.../qandact_view.

    22.   National Coalition for the Homeless, "Education of Homeless Children and Youth," accessed February 20, 2014, http://www. nationalhomeless.org/factsheet/education; "Sequestration's Effects on Nonprofits," *State-by-State Impact*, accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.givevoice.org/state-impact.

    23.   See for an example of this work R. da Costa Nunez, "Access to Success: Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families," *Social Work in Education* 16, no. 1 (1994): 21-30.

ciety."[24] Children who are homeless, without question, are weighed down with a myriad of real, serious, and difficult challenges to overcome. These challenges, however, do not automatically imprint negative life trajectories on these young people. Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel provided an alternative asset-based narrative to this deficit-based perspective, "...burgeoning research has begun looking into the strengths of homeless students and has found such youths to possess numerous qualities that can lead to positive adaptation to adulthood, including being strong and resilient, as well as possessing spiritual values."[25] Effects of homelessness are not an *either-or* proposition, rather they are *and-both* kinds of propositions as evidenced by Emily's upcoming resilience story.

Children who are Homeless: Hope and Resilience

Emily is a college student majoring in Art Education who lived at a YWCA Family Shelter as a young child and learned first-hand the challenges associated with divorce, abuse, poverty, and homelessness. Adding to her challenges were the many schools she and her siblings attended. Emily believes that "people come up with a lot of predetermined negative thoughts about what children in those situations are like without really getting to know them or caring what the situation is that put them where they are." This deficit-based thinking rests on tired stereotypes leading to presumptions and generalization about the future life-outcomes of individuals like Emily. This thinking does not stop there. I believe it narrowly ascribes not just their abilities, but their full humanity as well. But there is so much more to Emily's story as there is for many of these children of promise. Emily is a successful student and gifted artist, responsible employee, and most importantly a loving mother. Documentation describing the strengths, resilience, and capacities of children who are homeless is available and counteracts much of the literature, as exampled by the previously cited passage authored by Shane. Ann Douglas clearly frames this issue:

> Much of the research evaluating and describing children who are homeless has reported alarming high levels of developmental delays, emotional disturbances, and psychopathology among this population…The research, however, has focused almost exclusively on deficiencies and psychopathology in this population, virtually ignoring competency and strengths...Generalizing about children who are homeless will be inaccurate and misleading unless the varied experiences of homeless children and their families are taken into account.[26]

Cathyrn Schmitz, Janet Wagner, and Edna Menke conducted a study to better understand the "...voices of the children [to] illuminate the[ir] underlying strengths and vulnerabilities." [27] One-hundred and thirty-three poor families, living in unstable housing served as subjects. When assessed on standardized measures of anxiety, depression, and behavior most of these children

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24. Paul Shane, *What about America's Homeless Children* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage,1996), 27.
25. Debra M Hernandez Jozefocz-Simbeni and Nathaniel Israel, "Services to Homeless Students and Families: The McKinney-Vento Act and Its Implications for School Social Work Practice," *Children and Schools* 28, no. 1: (2006): 37.
26. Ann Douglas, "Rethinking the Effects of homelessness on Children: Resiliency and Competency," *Child Welfare* LXXV, no. 6 (November-December 1996): 742.
27. Cathryn Schmitz, Janet Wagner and Edna Menke, "The Interconnection of Childhood Poverty and Homelessness: Negative Impact/Points of Access," *Families in Society* 82, no. 1 (2001): 77.

scored within normal ranges. Some children's scores, however, indicated a need for mental health intervention and about one-third of the children demonstrated social competence problems, such as making and keeping friends.[28]

When interviewed for this study, most mothers viewed their children positively, characterizing them as, "loving," "helpful," and "bright."[29] One child was described by his mother this way, "He's charming, sweet, easy to get along with. He's inquisitive, understanding and lovable. He's the kind of child you would like to have."[30] These mothers also portrayed their children as performing above average in school. On measures of academic achievement most scored within grade level ranges, while some scored above grade level. Nearly all of the children told the interviewers they had career goals and plans for reaching them, such as earning college degrees. Over one-half had dreams of becoming professionals like doctors, lawyers, and teachers; or skilled workers like pilots, truck drivers, and police officers. Possessing values such as working hard, studying and getting good grades, respecting teachers and getting a good job also typified this cohort. The above stated authors articulated a realistic way of thinking about children who are homeless, "Frequently, children living in poverty are considered high risk and approached from a deficit model. While the potential negative consequences of poverty and homelessness are well established...this study identified…strengths that also exist."[31]

Carol Ziesmer & Louise Marcoux queried teachers about the academic performance of their 88 students who were homeless. [32] Teachers reported 35% were functioning at grade level in math and reading, and 40% scored in the normal range on adaptive functioning.[33] An emergent conclusion was that this group displayed a great range across their needs, strengths, and abilities—some children were coping successfully and acting with resiliency while some were not. Carole Ziesemer, Louise Marcoux & Barbara Marwell found little difference when comparing reading and mathematics achievement measures for the 145 mostly African-American children who were homeless, and a matched group of 142 highly mobile and low SES children.[34] About one third of both groups performed at or above grade level in these academic areas. On measures of adaptive functioning about one-half of both groups scored positively outside the clinical range while no significant differences were identified between these groups on measures of problem behaviors. Also, no significant differences regarding measured self-worth emerged between groups. All children rated scholastic competence and behavior as more important than athletic or social performance and physical appearance.

Similar findings regarding the academic competence of children who were homeless have been well documented.[35] Many children who are homeless are hopeful about their futures, despite living with difficult circumstances. Three telling findings were generated when sixty children staying in shelters were asked to make drawings about their hopefulness and then write sto-

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28. Ibid.

29. Ibid, 71.

30. Ibid, 71-72.

31. Ibid, 74.

32. Carol Ziesemer and Louise Marcoux, "Academic and Emotional Needs of Homeless Students," *Social Work in Education* 14, no. 2 (1992): 77-85.

33. Ibid.

34. Carole Ziesemer, Louise Marcoux and Barbara Marwell, "Homeless Children: are they Different from other Low-Income Children," *Social Work* 39, no. 6 (1994): 658-668.

35. See for an example of this work Ann Masten, Donna Miliotis, Sandra Grahan-Bermann, MaryLouise Ramirez and Jennifrer Neeman, "Children in Homeless Families: Risks to Mental Health and Development," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 2 (1993): 335-343.

ries explaining this hope. One, the children described hope in their lives; two, they demonstrated how to generate hope in their lives; and thirdly, the children articulated how to persevere and remain hopeful.[36] The William and Mary, College of Education sponsored-initiative *Project Hope* is a comprehensive, federally funded grant project. Its purposes "...ensure the enrollment, attendance, and the success of homeless children and youth in school through public awareness efforts across the [Virginia] commonwealth and sub-grants to local school divisions." Wide ranging support for children who are homeless, such as seminars and conferences; early childhood education; mentoring, tutoring, and health services; as well as parent education have been offered since 1995. *Project Hope*, through its many publications, unabashedly states that many children who are homeless display resilience and succeed in school, with some identified for participation in programs for gifted students.[37] Documentation obviously exists offering differing perspectives about the life chances of children who are homeless.

Preliminary Ethnographic Findings: Four Case Studies

Over the past two years, I have been privileged to get to know and interact with 35 different families and their 120+ children staying at the nearly 3 decades old Churches United for the Homeless (CUFH) Shelter located in a small northwestern Minnesota city. These children ranged in age from 3 to 16 years and represented several different racial and ethnic groups: Haitian, African-American, Somali, Sudanese, Iraqi, Indigenous, Hispanic, and Caucasian. These young people benefit from the CUFH foundational principles of love, grace, hospitality, and service, and an organizational culture that promotes "seeing" children for who they are and treating them with dignity and respect.

Churches United for the Homeless, founded in 1987, is the region's largest comprehensive shelter and the only shelter serving both single men and women and one- and two-parent families within a 225 mile geographical area. Emergency sheltering services are provided for over 700 homeless men, women and families annually. From July 2011 through December 2013, 395 children and their 189 families stayed at the shelter, with 50% (n= 198) of these children attending K-12 schools. The average stay is approximately 30 days for individuals and up to 90 days for families. While the shelter is staffed for 8 families, usually a minimum of 13 find shelter at CUFH. Medical, mental health, and substance abuse referral services as well as case management and community nursing services are provided on-site with the goal of moving residents to transitional and/or permanent housing. Fifteen full-time staff plan, direct, and facilitate the facility's services.[38]

Over the past two years 35 teacher education students and I have provided on- and off-site activities for children staying at CUFH one to three times per week. These students attend a small regional university where I teach in the Foundations of Education program. Their participation satisfies the service learning requirement for the Social Foundation of Education class and/or a volunteer initiative. Many of these teacher education students reflected that they 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. Sadly, this perception appears to

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36. Kaye Herth, "Hope as Seen Through the Eyes of Homeless Children," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28, no. 5 (1998): 1053-1062.

37. William and Mary School of Education, "Project Hope," accessed May 2, 2014, http://www.wm.edu/hope.

38. Churches United for the Homeless, "Churches United for the Homeless," accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.churches-united.org.

be a popular viewpoint held by many in our society. Through their CUFH experiences, the majority of my students grew to share more supportive and affirming perspectives. Comments made by my students revealed the change,

> They are curious, like to be involved, show interest in the activities, and ask a lot of questions…Many of the children are very open to exploring and they are very creative...they are not lazy and hopeless...they all have something that they want to do...they are very resilient…Some love to draw...some love motor activities...some are wild and sometimes do not listen...they all have different and unique talents…I think most of the time society just ignores them or they're invisible to society...which is wrong…When I talked with my dad about these children and their needs, he accused me of being a Socialist.

The teacher education students, children and I engage in activities that include various art projects, board and computer games, sports and games, model building, creative dramatics, singing and playing musical instruments, and homework help. We also regularly travel the local community to visit the fire station, art museums, public library and university, parks, and summer festivals. We have formed local partnerships with the public school district, YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, public library, university, food and beverage establishments, churches, and nonprofit organizations. An Art Club is also provided on Saturday mornings. Our work with these children, supported by literature acknowledging the strengths of children who are homeless, pushes back against a narrowing kind of deficit-based perspective. Alternatively, we have come to understand these are children of promise, resilient and multi-dimensional, with varied interests, gifts, and talents, who are certainly "unfinished" as suggested by Ayers. [39]

The following college student story illustrates these ideas:

> I was working with 7 year-old October [a child staying at the CUFH] one day and we were doing newspaper sculptures and he was so excited. We were going to make a cat. He was making each individual piece of the cat and then we were attaching them. He was having so much fun. I told him when he grew up he could be a sculptor. He looked up at me and his eyes lit up. He was so excited and he was like—"yeah, I could be a sculptor"...and I said "yeah, you could." It was amazing to see how even with the slightest suggestion of his talents...he realized he could be something.

Another college student gave voice to the multi-dimensional nature of the young man he is mentoring. This young man is being raised by a dad struggling with addiction, unemployment, and the stereotype of homelessness, but who works hard at being a good parent. This dad reads to his son nightly, recently took his son to a Powwow (i.e., Native American dancing, singing, and socializing event) held on our campus, and is keenly aware of his son's social skills, math and reading abilities. The college student stated:

> He is always happy to see me. He is interested in lots of stuff. He likes to read about animals and cars and play board games. I have noticed he is good at problem solving and analyzing things. He is really active and wild sometimes, but is smart and successful in

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    39. William Ayers, *Teaching Toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 40.

school. Architecture is an example of his interests. I told him architects are like artists and mathematicians who design buildings...he was intrigued by this idea.

Interestingly this boy and his father moved from the shelter to more permanent housing, but continue coming to the shelter each week to participate in activities we provide because he enjoys them so much.

To more systematically catalog the multi-dimensional nature of the children staying at CUFH, I have begun conducting a more formal qualitative research study. The Minnesota State University Moorhead Institutional Review Board, Moorhead School District, and the Churches United for the Homeless Shelter approved this study. My goal is to provide safe and supportive spaces for these children and their advocates to express their voices. Ultimately, I want to move the dialogue around children who are homeless from pathology and victimization to a more balanced discourse emphasizing their interests, gifts, and talents. The study involves three parts. First, I had 20 children complete an *I'M Special* Survey with questions about "My Favorite Things," "Being Famous," and "Best Things about Me."[40] Second, I made fifty 45-minute observations during the activities and Art Club program to gain better understanding for the children's interests, gifts, and talents. Third, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 adult stakeholders, including shelter staff (n=3) and parents/guardians (n=3), teacher education mentors (n=5), and school district personnel (n=6) to gain a deeper understanding for their perspectives and knowledge about the multi-dimensional lives of the children staying at the shelter. As of this date, preliminary findings from the past 2 years are available, as data collection will continue for an additional 2 years. Nonetheless, emergent findings are helping us better understand these children and hopefully remind service providers that youth who are homeless are indeed multi-dimensional and should not be defined solely by their status as homeless. Our experiences at the shelter reveal children on a continuum: some struggling with challenges caused by homelessness, and some weathering the challenges associated with homelessness. What follows are preliminary findings for four children.

Imani

Imani is a 12-year old middle school African-American girl with a 4.0 GPA who dreams of attending college one day. Her love of reading is evident. Recently she read the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series and now is enjoying *The Book Thief*.[41] She is a gifted artist who has been drawing caricatures for several years. Imani works diligently to develop her drawing skills and currently is learning to play chess. One of my students made this observation about Imani:

> She loves drawing and is a wonderful artist. And she's very good at it for not having taken classes where they teach you how to draw. She understands the mechanics very well, and takes an interest in other people recognizing her talent as well as wanting to help others with their drawing.

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40. The *I'M Special Survey* was adapted for this population of children from *The All About Me Gazette* and queried children about "Favorite Things" such as cartoons and school subjects; about "Being Famous" for example what they would cook if they were a famous chef or invent as a famous inventor; and about "Best Things about Me" like three reasons they are awesome. See http://www.pinterest.com

41. Stephanie Meyer, *Twighlight* (New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2005); Suzanne Collins, *Hunger Games* (New York, NY: Scholastica Press, 2008); Marcus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

Her excellent social skills are put to good use in making new friends while transferring between schools, helping teach the younger children at CUFH during various activities, and taking an authentic interest in the lives of the college student mentors. Like the 20 children completing the *I'M Special* Survey, Imani's responses were very age-appropriate and revealed a child's view of the world. Some "Favorite Things" were musician Rihanna, movie *Hunger Games*, sport team Chicago Bears, and she likes Skittles candy, Frosted Flakes cereal and Sprite soda pop.[42] In responding to the "Being Famous" section, if Imani were a super-hero she would save as many people as possible, as an author would write about middle-school 'drama,' and as an inventor she would invent a machine that completes homework. She indicated that some "Best Things About Me" were caring for friends when they needed help, acting nice to her classmates by complimenting them, and being kind to her family in any way she can. Imani also views herself as being smart in Math and able to make people laugh. She demonstrates several strengths, exhibits a positive life-outlook, and views herself positively despite the fact she has been homeless for the past 2 years, changed schools several times, and has been staying at CUFH for the past three months. While experiencing these traumatic events, Imani assists her mother with parenting her seven year- and one year-old sisters. She is adapting well to this stressful situation, like a number of children who are homeless[43]

Caleb

Caleb is a 13-year old middle school African-American student who traveled cross-country to stay at the shelter for two months with his parents and two younger brothers before moving to more permanent housing. Caleb earns B's in the middle school he attends. He is the most talented basketball player in his middle school of 1350 students. This conclusion is shared by those who have watched him play: his teachers, myself, and his college student mentors. He demonstrates outstanding offensive and defensive skills in addition to great physical abilities and excellent spatial intelligence. While skilled in playing several sports and possessing great knowledge about collegiate and professional sports, Caleb indicated his favorite school subjects were Math and Science. Responses from his *I'M Special Survey* included liking school, trying hard to do his best, completing at least one hour of homework daily, and listening to his parents and teachers. According to Caleb, resisting negative peer pressure by standing up for his beliefs, knowing he has control over things that happen to him, and being optimistic about his future describe "Best Things about Me." Similar to many middle school students, his friends are important. Caleb indicated he is good at making and keeping friends and regularly asks his friends how they are doing so they know he cares about them.

As was seen with Iamni, Caleb has experienced homelessness prior to his stay at the CUFH. His parents struggle with securing employment, their marital relationship, and mental health issues. Although quiet and reserved, Caleb is a confident young man who possesses much resilience that will hopefully serve him well in the future. Imani and Caleb's stories demonstrate children who possess several strengths and protective factors, like high academic achievement,

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42. Collins, Suzanne, *Hunger Games,* Film, directed by Gary Ross (2012, Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate).
43. See for an example of this work Diana Bowman, Christina Dukes and Jan More, *Summary of the State of Research on the Relationship between Homelessness and Academic Achievement Among School-Aged Children and Youth* (Washington, DC: National Center for Homeless Education, US Department of Education, January 2012): 3-26.

strong self-concept, positive relationships with a parent and successful experiences that can ward off negative effects of risk factors associated with poverty and homelessness.[44]

Shayla

Shayla is a multi-racial 11-year old fifth grade student staying at the shelter with her mother and two older sisters. Emotional intelligence and social competence are her gifts. She responded to a prompt on the *I'M Special* Survey about people liking things about her by indicating she is friendly, asks questions to begin conversations, and has a great personality. Her mother agreed with this assessment and told me that Shayla will "be OK as she gets along well with everybody, regardless of their age...she is well behaved and very mature...has great social and friendship skills...a sweet personality." Much to the enjoyment of my college students, she took a real interest in their lives as well as with other children and adults staying at the shelter. Responding to a "Best Thing About Me" prompt, Shayla made known she cared for her family by telling them she loves them. Another gift is her sense of humor. In responding to a question about what she should create as a famous inventor, she wrote about making shoes that shoveled snow when a button was pushed. Shayla finds "pure joy" in many of the activities we provide, from board games and hopscotch to reading to balloon play to table tennis. Her interests include painting, drawing, and clay sculpting. The college student CUFH Art Club teacher shared these thoughts about Shayla,

> She is so creative and comes running into the room each Saturday morning to help me set up. Shayla has such an amazing attention span...you give her a project, she becomes completely enthralled in it, and stays with it for a long time.

She is an avid reader who recently finished *A Child Called It,* likes to sing and can skillfully ride a long skate board. Shayla hopes her mother will find a job soon so she can take gymnastics.[45]

Jared

Jared is a White 14-year old student who attends an alternative high school purposed to meet the unique needs of students at risk. Along with his mother, grandmother, brother, and sister, they recently moved to more permanent housing after a three-month shelter stay. On the *I'M Special* Survey this shy young man responded to the section titled, "Being Famous," this way— as a super hero he would save whomever he could, create 3D animation as an artist, and teach science if he were a famous teacher. Jared, like many young people his age, spends little time reading and much time playing computer games and dreaming of a career in computer graphics. Tim, Jared's 9-year old brother, has aspirations too—he also wants to be a science teacher. Jared, a gifted chess player, really enjoys beating my college students. He believes that "Best Things About Me" are helping friends, respecting classmates, loving his family, and being polite and patient. Jared is one of the most polite and considerate young men I have had the good fortune to meet—I wholeheartedly agree with his self-assessment. A similar conclusion was reached by

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44. Laura Neiman, "A Critical Review of Resiliency Literature and its Relevance to Homeless Children," *Children's Environments Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1988): 1-25.

45. Dave Pelzer, *A Child Called It: One Child's Courage to Survive* (Deerfield, Florida: Health Communications, 1995).

local teachers I interviewed regarding their students who were homeless. The alternative high school Jared attends partners with our education department's Social Foundations of Education classes. This semester Jared participated in two partnership projects: creating a public service announcement concerning community gardens and a "Light at the End of the Tunnel" project based on the novel The *Book Thief*.[46] While successfully completing this work with his teacher education mentors Jared was an engaged researcher and collaborator. These four case studies reveal children who are multi-dimensional with varied interests, gifts, and talents that help them respond more successfully to the challenges homelessness presents them.

Children who are Homeless: Recommendations for Creating a New Reality

Changes to the funding, housing, and educational systems that serve children who are homeless, like Imani, Caleb, Shayla, and Jared, must change in order for them to lead healthy, satisfying, and happy lives. Like many American public schools, the district schools the children staying at CUFH attend are persistently underfunded. Interviews conducted with teachers from the schools the children who are homeless attend report being overwhelmed by problems presented by the ever- increasing numbers of children who are homeless—specific problems abound. Here are several examples shared by these teachers. The nearly 200 students who are homeless in this district of 5,000 are served by one part-time Homeless-School liaison. A single Social Worker is employed in this district's 1350 student middle school and the 1500 student high school. Extreme mobility is a persistent and severe problem in the 900 student school serving the elementary children staying at CUFH. Several teachers reported up to 15 students joining and leaving their classrooms within the first six months of the school year. Class sizes of 25 to 30 students compound these problems. Ninety per cent of all new students enrolling in this elementary school are served by Individual Educational Plans, 450 qualify for Free and/or Reduced Lunch, many scored below grade level on state tests, and over 70 students qualify for ELL services. Many of the children staying at the CUFH are over-represented in these numbers.

This elementary school currently employs a part-time Social Worker, one Counselor, and 1.5 FTE English Language Learners teachers. These teachers try to serve the 71 children qualifying for this service. And yet this staff produces herculean efforts on behalf of the children each day. The CUFH staff equally struggle with serving the needs of such a large number of children: over 200 school-age children have stayed at the shelter in the past 2.5 years. Obviously this challenge cannot be resolved by teachers and shelter staff simply working *harder* than they already are. Educational policies, like the ones listed below, would help the schools in the above district as well as the nation's schools better serve students who are homeless.

- Hiring Social Workers, Counselors, English Language Learner teachers.
- Hiring additional classroom teachers to reduce class sizes.
- Establishing community-school health clinics.
- Improving drop-out prevention programs.
- Increasing funding to low-income schools.
- Creating relevant and culturally meaningful curriculum and instruction.
- Providing high-quality summer/after school programs.[47]

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46. Zusak, *The Book Thief*.

47. Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, "Broader, Bolder Approach to Education," accessed February 16, 2014, http://www.broadapproach.org.

Social and economic policies, exampled below, are also needed to smooth the "outside of school" burden for families who are homeless.

- Safe and comfortable accessible housing.
- Expanded job training and living wage scales.
- Universal healthcare.
- Universal early childhood education.
- Expanded earned income tax credits.
- Elimination of food insecurity would go a long way in responding to the myriad of needs experienced by those who are homeless.[48]

A family-friendly shelter offering high quality onsite child care, age appropriate children and youth programming, and parent support groups and educational opportunities is sorely needed in this community, like in many of the nation's communities. In 2006, 30% of family shelter requests went unmet according to a survey of 23 cities.[49] The successful "Housing First" model has a proven track record in ending and preventing family homelessness.[50]

In addition to improving systems that serve children who are homeless, an ideological shift needs to occur in order for these children to be viewed more holistically as they live out the multi-dimensional stories of their lives. A pressing need exists to create a new reality that considers the strengths and resilience of children who are homeless. Children who are homeless face real challenges, including lack of government and private sector support, prejudice and discrimination, and the deficit-based approach sanctioned in much of the literature. This new reality, while acknowledging and responding to the hardships of homelessness, views these children as multi-dimensional and unfinished, with "hopes, dreams, and aspirations...passions and commitments...[and] skills, abilities, and capacities...."[51] Seeing children who are homeless, as children of promise, like Imani, Caleb, Shayla, and Jared, will create the conditions to grow and nurture capacities, resourcefulness, and resilience. When children who are homeless are seen in this way, not only do they benefit, but society as well.

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