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"Get up and get on": literacy, identity work and stories in the lives of families residing at a homeless shelter

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"GET UP AND GET ON": LITERACY, IDENTITY WORK AND STORIES IN THE

LIVES OF FAMILIES RESIDING AT A HOMELESS SHELTER

by

Mary Margaret Jacobs

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Teaching and Learning (Language, Literacy and Culture)
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Kathryn F. Whitmore

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative research study, I examine the literacy practices of five families who resided in a homeless shelter and the larger social, cultural, institutional and historical contexts of their lives. I frame the study around sociocultural perspectives of literacy with attention to the complexity of literacy as it is taken up for fulfilling cultural and social goals within families, neighborhoods, and communities. Rejected in this study is the notion that literacy is the silver bullet for overcoming the stark inequalities represented in U.S. society. Rather, literacy is complicated through the lens of sponsorship (Brandt, 2001) to suggest the differential access people have to literacy, the power sponsors have to sanction particular forms of literacy that are not necessarily powerful for the people they claim to support, and the schools and marketplace that may dismiss existing literacies that families use in their everyday lives.

To illustrate the complexity of the lives of my participants before they arrived at the shelter, during their stay at the shelter, and as they transitioned from the shelter, I employed the following methods: ethnographic methods to collect data of participant observation and interview; dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2012) to examine the stories revealed in the interviews with parents and what the stories communicated about the individual participants as they engaged in narrative identifying (Frank, 2010); the theoretical construct of capital "D" Discourses (Gee, 2005) to examine the identity work parents engaged in as they took up overlapping Discourses that allowed them to challenge deficit myths surrounding homelessness, life in their former neighborhoods and sometimes their race, ethnicity or class

background; and counterportraits (Meyer, 2010) to challenge or interrogate the official portrait of homelessness that relies on statistics and too commonly focuses on deficits attributed to families living in poverty rather than challenges associated with inequality.

The counterportraits that evolved from this study complicate the official portrait of homelessness and its relationship to literacy and poverty. The data show that the families in the study engaged in wide-ranging literacy practices for multiple purposes: economic, social and cultural. They believed in the promise of an education to secure a good job and a permanent home, and they aspired for their children to have better educational and life opportunities than they had growing up. Despite their attempts to assimilate and their resistance to the deficit perspectives that surrounded them and their families, the parents in the study did not benefit in significant ways, but continually struggled against the official portrait. The data suggest that the official portrait of homelessness is largely dismissive of the social problems associated with stark inequality in U.S. society (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Complicating the role of literacy within this larger context of inequality is necessary to understand the wide gulf between the official portrait and the counterportraits presented in this report.

Abstract Approved: _____

Thesis Supervisor

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Title and Department

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Date

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Mary Margaret Jacobs

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
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To Melody, Sandy, Shana, Kendra, Julissa and William,
and their children

It's not a secret.
It's a testimony.
It's a story.
It's going to help somebody else.

-Melody

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This work was completed amongst the hustle and bustle of family life and a teaching career. Except for the day a crawdad was transported from a large plastic bag full of water to the aquarium near my desk with limited success, research and writing seemed to flow rather seamlessly with the daily routines of my life. This can be attributed to how blessed I was in my scholarly audience and in the strong network of colleagues, friends, and family who supported me in this endeavor.

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CHAPTER I

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In the first month of 2012, a Long Island teenager residing in a homeless shelter with her family learned that she was a semifinalist among only 299 other high school students in a the prestigious Intel Science Talent Search (Chang, 2012). Samantha Garvey was pushed into the celebrity spotlight. She was invited to be a guest in the audience during President Obama's State of the Union speech shortly following the announcement. The congressman who invited her suggested Samantha's presence would illustrate the unconscionable truth that a middle class family with a gifted child could become homeless. Yet this portrayal of Samantha's family as middle class is skewed in ways that silence the plight of the working poor. Samantha's family fell behind on the rent after her mother, an immigrant from El Salvador, was injured in a car accident and could no longer work as a nursing assistant. Her father was also in the accident, but was able to continue working as a cab driver. His wages did not cover their living expenses and they were evicted. The circumstances under which Samantha's family became homeless are probably not unusual. The circumstances under which her homelessness has been recognized are highly unusual. The surprise of an Intel semifinalist living in a shelter is what commanded so much attention.

Samantha Garvey and her siblings are 3 of the estimated 1.5 million children a study by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2004) predicts are likely to experience homelessness in the U.S. in a given year. Although Samantha's family has now transitioned from life in a shelter, it is hopeful that her story will generate more attention to homelessness in the United States. Unfortunately, Samantha's homelessness was not the catalyst for the concern for her

family's well-being. Without the science award, we probably wouldn't have heard Samantha's story and we may not have had to question our assumptions about what it means to be homeless. The families I work with every week at a transitional shelter have wishes for their children to succeed, just as Samantha's parents do. Without the distinction of a prestigious award, they are not likely to get the same attention and concern. Their lives and circumstances are more likely to be viewed as a series of bad decisions, incompetence and irresponsible behavior. Samantha's award symbolizes hard work and success in school linked to literacy not often associated with families experiencing homelessness.

I facilitate an art and story hour once a week at a transitional shelter. My experience suggests that families experiencing homelessness want their children to succeed and want to provide opportunities for them to do so. As new families move into the shelter, I ask parents if they would like books for their children from the shelter's book collection consisting of discards from the public library and new and used books from donors. Parents often readily accept the offer of books and sometimes marvel at titles they remember from their own childhood. I have observed parents repeatedly sharing books with their children or children engaging with books as their parents work on the official texts of housing and employment. More prevalent are beliefs that parents experiencing homelessness do not value reading and writing. These assumptions extend so far as to suggest that illiteracy is what led families to homelessness or can lead them out, dismissing or grossly simplifying the emotional, social and economic constraints associated with the circumstances of many people living in shelters. The media contributes to this bootstrapping theory by making Samantha Garvey a case for what hard work and literacy can get you in this world. In Samantha's case, a rent-subsidized home for her family without delay, a $50,000 scholarship from AT& T, and a shot at the $100,000 prize from Intel are the rewards that will allow her family to start again in

their own home. Unfortunately, many of the children who are living in shelters will never get the same opportunities, despite their willingness to work hard and take up the literacies ascribed the highest value in our society.

According to my observation, literacy practices are prevalent in the lives of the families at the shelter (see Appendix A). Print materials such as post-it notes shared between parent and child, displays of favorite books, scripts for plays, score keeping records, and artwork accompanied with writing are artifacts I have found scattered about the children's room at the shelter.   One afternoon, as I sat at a round table in the commons area of the shelter with three of the children enrolled in this study, Brianna, age 9, exclaimed, "I braid my mom's hair while she reads the Bible." We were discussing what the girls were reading at school while they painted with watercolors. Brianna asked me if I wanted to see the Bible. When it was time to clean up, the girls insisted I see their family room. Julien, age 11, was also adamant that I see her trumpet she was playing in the school band and routinely practiced in the parking lot adjacent to the shelter. The room was very tidy; four twin beds were pushed up against the opposite walls with an open space in the middle. There were windows on one wall and the blinds were drawn. On the wall nearest the entrance to the room, four long shelves housed the family's few possessions at the shelter. Their clothes, toiletries and books were stacked neatly in piles and organized in various recycled containers. Brianna retrieved the Bible from a stack of three identical bright pink books on the bedside table between two of the beds. She immediately flipped to a page bookmarked with a bracelet. On page 936 of the Bible, titled *God's Word for Girls*, Brianna squinted to read the tiny print. She determined her mom would be reading on the topic of love next. This moment, like many others I observed during the eight months of data collection on family literacy practices at the shelter, gave me pause as I considered my own family's literacy rituals and routines and the value ascribed to them in the institution of school.

Brianna's experience with Bible reading should be regarded with the same high esteem, but her position as a child residing at a homeless shelter may overshadow the literacies her family engages in for cultural and social purposes (Street, 1997).

Despite the myriad ways I observed families practicing literacy at the shelter, if you ask someone to describe a person experiencing homelessness, illiteracy is likely to be one of the descriptors. Though Samantha Garvey may shift some of our perspectives on homelessness, we may readily accept that she is an anomaly because she is exceptional, gifted or extremely hardworking. This belief is more consistent with the dominant discourse that people achieve based on innate ability and personal grit (Bowles & Gintis, 2010). Conveniently, we may dismiss the idea that Samantha is a student from an underrepresented group who was the beneficiary of opportunities that allowed her to achieve her goals and what might happen if more children had these same opportunities.

The literacy practices people choose to use and are coerced to use do not always provide solutions to problems or fulfillment of goals (Brandt, 2001). Forms of literacy can also subject people experiencing homelessness to delays in housing, disability, healthcare, employment and childcare best illustrated in a constant cycle of applications, refusals and red tape (Taylor, 1996). Literacy is no panacea for eradicating poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, drug abuse and other forms of oppression that may contribute to, or stem from, the existence of differential power structures in U.S. society (Edmondson & Shannon, 1998). Moreover, literacy in some accounts does more to perpetuate social stratification and institutional abuse through official and often publicly censored documents. Taylor (1996) suggests that the oppressive nature of the language of official texts upholds the inequalities in U.S. society; official texts maintain the privilege and power of some while alienating and silencing people with no access. She argues that by juxtaposing the reality of people's lives with official texts we can begin to understand how

language can both empower and constrain depending on who you are and where you come from. Taylor writes,

> If you have power and privilege in society, literacy can be used to maintain your social status. You can use print to your advantage and to the disadvantage of others. Laws, regulations, administrative procedures, affidavits, insurance policies, trusts, reports, memorandums, forms, questionnaires, licenses, credit cards, identification badges, personal codes, and work orders are all forms of literacy used by those in authority to exercise power over those who are denied such liberty (p.10).

Taylor refers to the people who are denied such liberty as "politicals." She argues that an endless number of hierarchical literacy configurations allow for the powerful in society to assume dominant control through the construction and manipulation of official texts.

> Bureaucratic texts are used to control the circumstances in which politicals live their everyday lives. They are forced into literacy configurations of dependency that adversely affect their identity, erode away their personhood, and cripple their ability to survive. They suffer public humiliations and personal violations as official documentation takes away their rights and privileges and leaves them powerless to protest because they have no access to the text (p.10).

Even in cases when we act with good intentions, our power and privilege may corrupt and manipulate others in ways that we are unaware. Learning from the people who supposedly need to be "fixed" or "helped" may set us on a path for understanding how we can facilitate more opportunities for families to fulfill their goals for the future.

The social, political, historical and institutional contexts in which families experiencing homelessness are situated allow us to understand the unique challenges and strengths they experience in their daily lives. Strengths cannot be recognized if the lens through which we try to understand homelessness is clouded with deficit perspectives associated with poverty. When we realize that parents

experiencing homelessness want better for their children, value education, and have goals for how they will improve their lives, it may become possible to question our preconceived notions about who the homeless are and what it means to be homeless. This reflection may lead to collaboration and dialogue that encourages families and individuals to take up agency in ways that redefine their contributions to the community where they live. First we must reject the notion that literacy is the magic bullet that allows for bootstrapping and a fulfilled life and attempt to understand the complexity of literacy in context. Unfortunately, the media frenzy over stories like Samantha Garvey's makes it easier to reduce literacy to a skill set that can provide opportunities to succeed in school and in life if you work hard enough to achieve it (Smith, 1989).

Through my observations working at the shelter I learned that literacy practices for the shelter residents abounded, whether influenced by the official texts of housing, disability and employment, or by the love of reading, the comfort of writing, or the responsibility of parenting. In any case, many of the people I encounter in my work at the shelter engage with print in ways that bring meaning to their lives, sometimes accomplishing the goals they seek and providing new opportunities. My dissertation research involves the study of the literacy practices of five families residing in a homeless shelter, the stories parents in these families tell about their experiences transitioning in and out of the shelter and how the parents' life, literacy and schooling histories shape their attitudes and beliefs about their own and their children's futures. The following research questions guide my inquiry:

Research Questions

1. What literacy practices do families engage in while experiencing homelessness?

2. What stories do families tell about their experiences transitioning in and out of the shelter?

3. How have the participants' particular life, literacy and schooling histories shaped their beliefs and attitudes toward their children's and their own futures?

Sociocultural Theory

Literacy in all its complexity is one of those taken for granted concepts ubiquitously assumed to fall neatly under a single definition. The dichotomy of literate/illiterate fuels the public discourse of what it means to be literate; to "have" literacy. Schools claim to provide it, governments pay to promote and sustain it, families live it and people's identities are intertwined with it. Yet, who decides what it means to be literate? Who decides what literacy is?

Sociocultural theorists explain literacy in broad terms of social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts (Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007). Literacy cannot be separated from the material conditions and social relations in which individuals engage with print (Street, 2001). Reading and writing are complex processes that involve real purposes to meet social and cultural goals and to construct meaning in our lives (Goodman, 1986; Meyer, 2010; Meyer & Whitmore, 2011). Literacy events happen within a social context, in a particular place and time. In this way, literacy practices are culturally constructed and historically situated (Brandt, 2001). Literacy practices are not static, but change with the times and within the society of which they are a part (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Gee's (1987) definition of literacy refers to primary and secondary discourses. Primary discourse is the "oral mode" acquired through socialization within a family and within a given cultural group. Secondary discourses are those that involve social institutions beyond the family, such as schools, government offices and workplaces. Within these institutions, people must communicate with non-intimates and secondary discourses are developed according to access to and practice within these institutions. Individuals and groups whose primary discourse closely matches the secondary discourses of the institutions have a great advantage in terms of acquisition of social goods such as money, power and status in a society. This leads Gee (1987) to define literacy as, "the control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses)"(p.25). Gee argues that children must engage in secondary discourses in order to acquire the language of political and economic power. He also suggests that children should have opportunities to acquire secondary discourses in meaningful and functional ways, just as they acquired their primary discourse.

The New London Group (1996) argue that the term literacy does not suffice in its scope of how people represent meaning in their lives. They are interested in how the textual representation of meaning is related to the increasingly diverse ways of using language and the expansion of alternative media (visual, audio, spatial) as forms of representation. They suggest the term "multiliteracies" to encompass the ways "language and other representational resources, constantly being made and remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes" (p .64). The increasingly complex relationships between different modes of meaning make it necessary that "multiliteracies" are validated in schools and ways to expand upon repertoires of multiliteracies are accessible to all members of society.

Constructing meaning is what compels people to engage in reading and writing. Powerful literacy can promote opportunities for raising social consciousness and imagining new possibilities (Smith, 1989). School literacy is more akin to the formal acquisition of reading and writing skills and often does not connect strongly with the lived realities of students (Heath, 1983; Lee, 2007; Mahiri, 1998; Smith & Whitmore, 2005). Ironically, the school literacy that many students from historically underserved groups experience actually undermine what they know and can do (Gee, 2004). Learning about the out-of-school literacies of families experiencing homelessness can tell us a great deal about how to shape policy and curricula to engage all students in meaningful literacies in school, promoting a more inclusive approach to how we educate children of differing cultural and class backgrounds in our public schools (Hicks, 2002; Hinchman et al, 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Street (2001) warns, "...be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may be simply imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies" (p. 430). Street suggests it is necessary to recognize the role of power relations in literacy practices in order to expose the way literacy is used for solidifying social stratification in U.S. society (McDermott, 1974). People regularly engage in imaginative and creative ways of using literacy to meet the demands of their daily lives based on their cultural concerns and interests, but these ways of using literacy are not necessarily ascribed value by the institutions of power in U.S. society.

<div align="center">Ideological Model of Literacy</div>

Drawing on critical sociocultural theory, Street (2001) uses the term "ideological model" to describe the rich cultural variation of literacy practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts. He writes, "literacy

practices are aspects not only of 'culture' but also of power structures" (p.434) and suggests the dominant approach to defining literacy, the "autonomous" model, disguises the power relations inherent in literacy practices through its position of neutrality. Reducing literacy to a neutral set of skills dismissive of context, privileges particular ways of using reading and writing, rigidly defines what is proper, and marginalizes the diverse ways people use literacy to make sense of their lives. Street contrasts the ideological model with the autonomous model in this way:

> The ideological model, on the other hand, does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understand them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power. In that sense the "ideological" model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the "autonomous" model (p.435).

The ideological model concerns not only the literacy events and practices that occur within them, but the ideological preconceptions that are embedded in them.   Street contends, "literacy practices are saturated with ideology" (p. 435). The conceptualization of literacy, as an ideological practice rather than a neutral cognitive tool of individuals, complicates issues of power and privilege as they relate to class and cultural backgrounds. The dominant institutions that define literacy using the "autonomous" model uphold the rich/poor gap in terms of socioeconomic, sociopolitical and sociocultural power through the naturalization of middle-class ways of reading and writing. Wider interpretations of what constitutes literacy practices are paramount to understanding and valuing the literacies families on the margins of middle-class literacy discourses possess.

Perhaps the notion of the "plurality of literacies" from Szwed (2001) best describes how we might challenge the narrowly defined dominant discourses surrounding literacy. He says, "...absolutes are few in questions of literacy, and that the roles of individuals and their places within social groups are preeminent in

determining both what is read and written and what is necessary to reading and writing" (p.305). Thus, out-of-school contexts seem to be the most promising arenas for broadening and accepting wider perspectives on what it means to be literate (Hull & Schultz, 2002). This study seeks to illuminate the pluralistic nature of literacy for families experiencing homelessness, a group whose strengths in terms of literacy and learning are often unrecognized in the school setting and in the larger society due to the prevailing deficit myths that surround them (Flores et al, 1991).

<u>Theoretical Concepts</u>

This study is grounded in a critical sociocultural theory of literacy (Gee, 2004; Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007; Street, 2001); to examine the rich cultural variation of literacy practices within different social contexts, I draw on the following theoretical concepts that are consistent with critical sociocultural theory:

- Narrative identifying, interpellation and narrative habitus (Frank, 2010), to examine the stories parents tell about themselves and their families while in transition and how the collection of stories available to parents influence their sense of who they can be and what is possible in their lives.
- Literacy Sponsorship (Brandt, 2001), to understand how life in a homeless shelter can both constrain and empower the literacies of families and the identity work they engage in.
- "Capital D" Discourses (Gee, 2005), to examine how parents engage in identity work in their actions and stories revealing overlapping Discourses and shifting identities that define who they are and who they see themselves becoming (Holland et. al, 1998).

The study illuminates the literacies of families in an out-of-school context who may not see their knowledge of the world as relevant in the dominant institutions of school and the larger community. It is my aim to draw attention to the strengths of families residing in a shelter, as well as the challenges they have experienced with the intention that it might lead to critical discussions on how communities, shelters and schools might work to improve the quality of life for families experiencing homelessness.

Narrative Identifying, Interpellation and Narrative Habitus

The reciprocal process of narrative identifying (Frank, 2010) involves how narratives call up possible identities and how people identify themselves through narratives. Frank argues that interpellation allows stories to teach people who they are:

> Interpellation in storytelling proceeds on two levels: the story calls on its characters to be particular sorts of selves, and it calls on listeners to recognize themselves in particular characters (p. 49).

Frank describes the stories that interpellate a person as narrative habitus, and defines narrative habitus as "the collection of stories in which a life is formed and that continue to shape lives"(p. 49), drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) theoretical concept of habitus. Frank refers to a central feature of what Bourdieu defines as habitus as "the predispositions that affirm being the kind of person an individual believes herself/himself to be"(p. 194). Frank offers four components of narrative habitus: a repertoire of stories, the competence to use the stories, a person's taste in stories, and resolution through predictable plot completions. He argues that people's narrative habitus of predictable plot completions for unfinished stories, or

their sense of the relationship between particular actions and consequences, are their sense of what is possible in their stories and in their lives.

Narrative identifying gives shape to the possible selves parents call up in the stories they tell in this study. It emphasizes that sustaining an identity is never static. Interpellation acknowledges the dialogical nature of storytelling, calling on the listener to connect with particular characters represented in the stories. This dialogical aspect of interpellation is central to the goal of capturing stories in counterportraiture, a research methodology I will describe in detail in chapter 3. The concept of narrative habitus provides insight into what the parents believe is possible once they transition from the shelter for themselves and their families.

<div align="center">Literacy Sponsorship</div>

Brandt (2001) describes sponsors of literacy as "…any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way" (p.19). Literacy sponsorship is often regarded as a benevolent act of helping others, particularly adults and children from underrepresented groups. While this may be the intention behind literacy sponsorship in many cases, access to literacy sponsors of one kind or another is often distributed along class lines (Brandt, 2001). Social and cultural differences, past experiences with schooling and the sponsor's expectations for the participants complicate how sponsorship is carried out. Furthermore, literacy may carry too high of a cost in terms of what must be sacrificed (home and culture) in order to attain the literacy ascribed value in the context of schooling and other formal institutions.

The continual shift in what it means to be literate is further complicated by the increasing demand for new literacies in the 21st century (Kress, 2003, New London Group, 1996). Now more than ever, access to sharply rising literacy

standards is paramount to political and economic security. Dependent on literacy sponsorship, some individuals will be denied access while others will be afforded the privilege of immersion in the historical, cultural, political and institutional literacy practices that have likely contributed to their elevated position in society. Differential access may be exacerbated by home resources in terms of technology, books, etc., but can also be attributed to more subtle distinctions related to homework assistance, materials, expertise in navigating assignment criteria, space to work and time to devote to work outside of school.

Literacy sponsorship and access to powerful literacies are not one in the same. A sponsor may provide access to a particular kind of literacy that is neither powerful nor liberating. Literacy is tied to economic and political power. Those who are in positions to sponsor literacy also determine access to it and the ways in which it is promoted and defined. Literacy is an ever-shifting concept. A person can be "literate" in one context but not necessarily in another. Literacy is tied to identity. Just as definitions of literacy and 'being literate' shift, so too do the identities of individuals seeking access to the labels associated with literacy (Gee, 2004). Sponsors of literacy can decide who is literate and what counts as literacy in any given context.

<u>Shifting Identities, Agency and "Capital D" Discourses</u>

In my work, the notion of literacy sponsorship is powerful for illustrating what forms of literacy are privileged over others, how families respond to literacy sponsorship at the shelter, the possible identities that emerge during the literacy events at the shelter, and the agency these identities both support and constrain through the literacy practices families engage in. My study examines how the literacy events sponsored at the shelter and the literacy practices of the families

influence the self-authoring of new identities and agency for families living there (Holland et al, 1998).

Holland et al. (1998) provide a framework for understanding identity and agency in the space of authoring. They conceive of the space of authoring as a place where social languages meet shaped by the concepts of privilege, position and power. Individuals gain a sense of their position relative to others based on what they conceive as their position of privilege and power within historical, cultural, and political contexts.

> It is not only being addressed, receiving others' words, but the act of responding, which is already necessarily addressed, that informs our world through others. Identity, as the expressible relationship to others, is dialogical at both moments of expression, listening, and speaking (p.172).

Holland et al. emphasize the potential for new cultural materials to bring about new meanings that promote social and cultural change. Within these opportunities for new cultural meanings to emerge, so do instances of agency, or the self-direction made possible by overlapping cultural worlds, and the self-authoring of identities. They write,

> Human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention. Humans' capacity for self-objectification - and, through objectification, for self-direction-plays into both their domination by social relations of power and their possibilities for (partial) liberation from these forces (p. 5).

Putting these ideas into the context of this study, the families (the sponsored), and the shelter staff and volunteers (the sponsors) and the literacy events they sponsor, influence the possible selves available within the shelter and the agency these identities promote or suppress. For the purposes of this study, I define identity as the self-authoring individuals engage in to define who they are through the "capital D" Discourses (Gee, 2005) they take up in the context of literacy

events at the shelter, but also as they narrate their past experiences in school and their former neighborhoods, and their plans for the future.

Gee's (2005) tool of "capital D" Discourses provides a framework for understanding identities in practice. Gee defines the term "capital D" Discourse as "...the ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity" (p. 21). He argues that "capital D" Discourses allow individuals to project a particular identity in a particular context. How we are positioned by what others do and say as well as how we position ourselves by the ways in which we respond and engage socially with the world around us shapes the possible identities individuals can adopt.

"Capital D" Discourses (which I will refer to simply as Discourses through the remainder of this report) are embedded in social institutions and govern what is socially acceptable within the institution. The Discourses of any social institution can be used to identify who is a socially meaningful member of a group. Gee (2005) argues that "...you are who you are partly through what you are doing and what you are doing is partly recognized for what it is by who is doing it" (p.23). He maintains that new Discourses can replace old ones and that the boundaries are contestable. Additionally, any given Discourse can involve multiple and shifting identities. New identities are possible in new contexts. Gee terms this notion of shifting multiple identities as socially situated identity. His notions of socially situated identity and Discourses allow me to examine literacy practices and events within differing social contexts, the way families are positioned within these contexts and by the sponsors of the literacy events, and the way the families position themselves within these contexts.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The social relations and political contexts that influence literacy practices in our society ascribe more privilege and visibility to some practices over others. The middle-class literacy practices of bedtime reading and book collections in family homes are among the most dominant and influential of family literacy practices. While I see value in these practices, I am troubled by the tendency for these practices to overshadow the other ways families engage with print, particularly because of the time and access both bedtime reading and owning book collections require. While I encountered bedtime reading and book collections in the lives of some of the families at the shelter, I actively searched for undervalued literacies as specific ways of interacting with print within particular sociocultural contexts and across generations of families experiencing homelessness that go beyond middle class ways of knowing (Heath, 1983).

I intend for the results of this study to give teachers, administrators and policy makers an alternative perspective of historically underserved children and families that might influence a shift in values, judgments and expectations in the school setting that challenge the dominant deficit perspective. The prominent voice on poverty in schools is a deficit model (Bomer et al, 2009; Ng & Rury, 2006). When the framework available to educators for understanding families living in poverty is deficit-based, important connections to be made between the out-of-school literacies families engage in and the language of economic and political power in the academic context of school go unnoticed or are easily dismissed (Bomer et. al, 2008). Questions of access and power influence what is valued in school and what is ultimately ignored or rejected as knowledge (Anyon, 1981). For families experiencing homelessness, much more research is needed to understand the myriad ways literacy is used prior to arriving at the shelter, for the purposes of daily

living in a shelter, and transitioning to and from life in a shelter setting as families

prepare for the future.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the purposes of this study, I am interested in family literacy, adult and community literacy, and homelessness and literacy studies that examine the literacy practices valued by individuals and groups and how this knowledge pertains to issues of diversity such as social class, race, culture, and language (Compton-Lily et. al, 2012). Specifically, in this chapter I review studies of literacy grounded in sociocultural theory that take a strength orientation toward families and individuals from underrepresented groups and situate literacy learning and practices in context. A sociocultural theoretical stance recognizes literacies as situated practices influenced by social relations and cultural practices (Street, 2001). A strength orientation suggests that all families have strengths that can be revealed by examining our own assumptions and challenging the dominant cultural deficit model that blames families of students from underrepresented groups for school failure (Auerbach, 1989; Flores, 1991; Meyer, 2010; Street, 1997).

Family Literacy

Historically, family literacy has been studied from the perspective of schools and has been largely defined as parental involvement in school (Auerbach, 1989). For this reason, families from underrepresented groups who have limited access to school discourse and practices are frequently targeted for school-to-home literacy initiatives in order to increase parental involvement (Dudley-Marling, 2009). Family literacy initiatives from this perspective are school literacy practices that are imposed on families in order to fix deficits. Less often is a definition of family literacy entertained that involves the perspectives of families and their daily

practices of making meaning in the world. As a result, the strengths of families go unrecognized in schools, contributing to a wider gulf between home and school for families on the margins of political and economic prosperity.

Family literacy research is often related to family literacy programs that intend to strengthen the literacy of the home by engaging families outside of school in school literacy practices closely aligned with white middle class ways of knowing. This thinking is largely based on a cultural deficit model which attempts to explain failure in school by blaming families and the literacy practices, or lack thereof in the home (Street, 1997). A recent review of family literacy scholarship by Compton-Lilly, Rogers and Lewis (2012) reveals a dominance of White female scholars in family literacy research and limited concern for issues of diversity in a majority of family literacy studies.

In an informative study, Galindo (2000) examined autobiographical essays written by Chicana teachers regarding their interpretations of family literacy events they experienced as children, particularly the intergenerational effort to help them acquire Spanish prior to the implementation of bilingual education in the U.S. Galindo analyzed examples of family literacy drawn from the autobiographical writing of the teachers. The 8 female and 2 male teachers were students in a graduate level course and each wrote an autobiographical essay from 10-12 pages in length, reflecting on and examining issues of education, literacy and culture in their life histories. Galindo's study revealed the diversity of literacy practices in the lives of the teachers and the literacy roles played by adults and children in the home and in the wider community. Personal letter reading and writing, as well as engagement with religious texts and instruction, were particularly important practices for young children acquiring the Spanish language and in families sustaining Spanish language literacy practices in their American homes. As a result of participating in the study, the teachers became aware of the wide variety of

literacy practices children bring to school, raising their potential to validate native language literacy acquisition and provide access to a wide variety of print materials that serve a variety of authentic functions for reading and writing in school.

Heath (2003) spent a decade immersed in an ethnography of the language practices and community lives of families living in working-class communities in the Piedmont area of South Carolina. She examined the language practices specific to the cultural settings where she studied the lives of the adults and children living there. Heath's thickly descriptive accounts of the lives of her participants illuminated how children learned the ways to act, behave and value through the language practices of the adult members of their communities. She described how boys and girls in Trackton and Roadville learned language practices that create different ways of being and knowing in the world and that these language practices are saturated with cultural and class distinctions. Heath warned of the detriment to children from underrepresented groups when the ways with words of their communities and classrooms differ from school language and literacy practices to the point that the students do not recognize the relevance of their lives in school, but are subjected to language and literacy practices that are unfamiliar to them. Heath advocates for classroom pedagogy that teaches students to code switch between cultural discourses without giving up their literacy and language histories and experiences from their homes and neighborhoods.

Similar to Heath, Hicks (2002) engaged in a qualitative study of the experiences of primary grade children from working-class backgrounds over a three-year period, contrasting their struggles in school with their out-of-school literacies that went unrecognized in school. Hicks explored the literacy histories of the children and the wealth of experiences, relations and strengths tied up in the literacy practices of their families that were rejected by school officials in the dominant white, middle-class discourses of school. She argues for educators to shift

to a lens that acknowledges and seeks to understand the social and material practices, relations and histories that reveal the complexity of individual students lives and literacies outside of school in order for students from underrepresented groups to see their lived realities and strengths as valuable in school.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' (1988) study of the language and literacy practices of urban African American families illustrates the deep conflict between the lived realities of families and the institutional contexts that both empower and constrain the families as they use literacy in their everyday lives. The researchers followed five families over three years. The Shay Avenue families, as Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines referred to them, functioned in ways that fostered cooperation and participation among family members as well as independence and competence in individual family members as they engaged in the community. Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines found that the parents of the children were determined to raise healthy children and were concerned for their safety as they played in the neighborhood and walked to and from school. These findings suggest that the inner-city families in this study behaved in ways consistent with what is deemed typical of "functioning" families irrespective of race or social circumstances. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines illustrate the complex ways in which print gets written and read in the changing social contexts of society and the ways the social system assumed to support families can actually both impede and enhance the families' lives. The Shay Avenue families in the study used literacy for a wide variety of purposes and audiences and in a wide variety of situations. Yet, that literacy was not always liberating for families, and in some ways constrained their daily lives.

As part of a larger study of eighty-eight children from middle-class, working-class and poor backgrounds, Lareau (2003) studied twelve families with nine and ten year old children through intensive "naturalistic" observations. The researchers followed the parents and children as they engaged in their daily routines of school,

church, organized play, family visits and doctor appointments.

Lareau carried out interviews first with the mothers and then with many of the fathers of the children. She also interviewed teachers and other school officials. Lareau and her research assistants visited the families in their homes and in community activities approximately twenty times in the period of one month. Most visits lasted about three hours. Additionally the researchers organized an overnight stay in each of the family's homes.

Lareau illustrates how the organization of daily life of the families is inextricably linked to language use with differences in cultural practices from one group to another. She found that in the middle-class homes, an emphasis was put on reasoning and in the working-class and poor families, there was an emphasis on directives. Lareau also found significant differences in the ways parents monitored and intervened in their children's schooling. Whereas middle-class parents tended to intervene frequently, working-class and poor parents tended to defer to school officials and depend on their leadership.

Lareau argues that deep divisions in social class are fueled by the selectiveness of our institutions and how these institutions ascribe value to some cultural patterns more than others. This is best illustrated in the policy recommendations made to the parents of working class and poor children that focus primarily on encouraging parents to use reasoning to bolster vocabulary and stressing the importance of parents taking a more active role in their children's schooling. Lareau notes that neither of these recommendations validates the cultural practices of the families on the margins of middle-class discourses. She urges policy development that helps professionals to be more sensitive to the distinct cultural differences interwoven with social class distinctions.

In a different cultural context, Li (2003) studied the lives and literacies of a Chinese immigrant family residing in a Canadian city and the struggles the children

encountered in school. Li constructed "counternarratives" that speak back to the grand narratives that characterize immigrant families as plagued with deficits as an explanation for school failure. Her design included weekly visits to the Liu family restaurant and home during two months of the year spaced three months apart. These visits lasted between one and two hours each. Li's aims were to examine home literacy practices, cultural beliefs about the literacy and social contexts in which the family had settled in their new home, and individual family members' experiences with literacy and schooling.

Li's findings suggest that the literacy practices and the daily routines of the family were deeply imbedded in heritage cultural practices and were inconsistent with the cultural and literacy practices valued in the schools the children attended. The counternarratives Li's research presents sharply contrast with the stories of success of many Asian minority students. Li attributes this difference of the downward spiral for the Liu children in school to social isolation from members of their ethnic community and the immediate community in which they lived and the low socioeconomic status of their neighborhood school. Li's work illuminates the sociocultural, sociopolitical and socioeconomic challenges that many immigrant families experience in their communities. The counternarratives provide a space for families to voice the challenges they experience and reveal what they value for their children. These counternarratives can be insightful territory for educators and policy makers to explore, uncovering the strengths of families that are undervalued or unrecognized in school culture, curricula and pedagogy.

Rogers (2002) conducted a two-year ethnographic study of an African American mother and her daughter living in urban poverty. Using discourse analysis Rogers identified three discursive contexts to illustrate the complexity and the tensions between the public and private literacy in their lives. These moments of tension in the Discourse of Mothering, the Discourse of Schooling and the

Discourse of the Committee on Special Education meeting for June Treader and her oldest daughter, Vicki, illustrate that despite their proficiency with language and literacy in their home and neighborhood, they were unable to benefit from this proficiency within the context of school. Rogers argues that Vicki's placement in a special education class as a result of the mismatch between the literacies of her home and school is just one part of the problem. She asserts that the ideological aspects of these discursive contexts are also in play and that as secondary discourses are being learned, so are the ideologies tied up in them.

<div align="center">Adult and Community Literacy</div>

The number of studies on adult literacy pales in comparison to the extensive body of research on childhood literacy. Much of the existing literature on adult literacy tends to put emphasis on remediation in adult literacy programs (Alvermann et al, 1998; Weiner, 2005). This may be due to a dominant belief in society that literacy is a final outcome measured by school achievement. For the purposes of this research, I reviewed studies of adult literacy that examine the literacy practices in the everyday lives of adults; particularly adults who are marginalized and whose voices are often silenced by notions of literacy as simply academic achievement (Brandt, 2001; Rose, 2004; Taylor, 1996).

Brandt (2001) demonstrates how generations of American families have responded to the rapidly changing and sharply rising standards for literacy in a series of extended case studies. Brandt's case studies illustrate the changing conditions of literacy learning for Americans born between 1895 and 1985, how literacy achievement is continually influenced by market forces and economic competition, and how the stakes by which it is measured are determined by those who have the power to sponsor it. Brandt's study exposes the differential access to literacy influenced by a market-driven system and its relationship to the imbalance

of power among people of differing social class and cultural backgrounds.

Rose (2004) investigated the literacy involved in the work of everyday Americans, from waiting tables to plumbing, and challenged the dominant discourse surrounding the intelligence of the American worker. Rose observed people at work and interviewed about what they were doing and why, probing reasons for why workers made particular choices to implement ways of going about their work. In some cases, Rose conducted follow-up interviews to inquire about the work and personal histories as well as the personal goals of individual workers. Video and audiotaping of the work he observed allowed Rose to further probe for and analyze the intellectual work the jobs required. Through rich descriptions of real American workers, Rose illustrates the intellectual skills that physical work requires. He argues that challenging the mind vs. hand dichotomy privileged in our society will allow us to consider more deeply education, job training, working conditions and higher wages for Americans in the labor sector.

Taylor (1996) worked for six years with men and women living on the margins of society. She described five adults whose lives were controlled by bureaucratic texts as they struggled against substance abuse, illness, poverty, homelessness and imprisonment. These case studies demonstrate the institutional documents that marginalize civil rights for many people who find themselves at odds with the system on which they depend. The adults in Taylor's study were caught in a continuing cycle of red tape and paperwork; the official documents they needed were often inaccessible, unhelpful or deliberatively oppressive in their attempts to change their situations for the better.

One of Taylor's informants, Sam, was homeless. Taylor traced Sam's unsuccessful efforts to live independently and how forms were used to keep him homeless. Sam's struggles with alcoholism, as well as having no permanent address and no social security number are illustrations of how people living on the margins

of society are bombarded with official texts. These "toxic literacies," as Taylor describes them prevent people from advocating for themselves or getting the chance to participate as a member of a community. She writes,

> People who are vulnerable to institutional abuse are denied access to the documentation that controls their lives. Documents are kept under wraps officially and unofficially. Very often when such documents are available, copies are too costly for people to obtain (p. 243).

 Some of Taylor's other participants lived within the toxicity of the prison system and the medical system. Taylor argues that people experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable to "toxic literacies" in our society.

Family Literacy in Shelters

Even more scant than the studies on adult literacy that are similar to my study is the research on the literacy of families living in shelters. MacGillivray et al (2010a) examined the literacies of families living in homeless shelters using a qualitative design with participant observation and over 70 interviews and considered how schools might respond to families in crisis. Rather than conducting a single in-depth case study, the researchers selected five unique and critical perspectives that illustrate the complexity surrounding children who live without permanent homes: a director of a homeless shelter, a principal and a teacher who work with children living in a homeless shelter, a parent living in a homeless shelter and a child living in a homeless shelter.

Additionally, MacGillivray et al (2010b) examined the literacy practices of mothers and children living in a transitional shelter and the institutions that influenced these practices: libraries, churches and schools. The researchers conducted observations and interviewed residents of one shelter, other stakeholders such as school and shelter administrators and teachers, shelter staff at

various shelters and experts on homelessness in Los Angeles County, CA. The authors noted the powerful ways the mothers and children in the study discussed their literacy practices and how the families initiated these practices themselves for social reasons of connecting with others and showing that they were competent in literacy. They examined the different ways mothers and children talked about their literacy practices across these three institutions. The library and church were contexts for choosing literacy practices that were meaningful to the families, whereas talk about school literacy focused on evaluation, daily routines and procedures. The qualitative study offers suggestions for supporting reading and writing for children living without homes in ways that are more inclusive of the larger literacy context of their lives outside of school.

Lindfors (2008) studied early interactions with books and written text during her work at SafePlace, a classroom for kindergarten and first grade children on the premises a domestic violence shelter where the children resided with their mothers. Lindfors' work allowed her to observe children engaging with written language as they used their oral language competence to make sense of print, even when they had limited experience with books before arriving at the shelter. Many of the observations Lindfors made about the children at SafePlace occur during her interactions with them in "The Book Place" a portable library she invited them to explore with her. Lindfors emphasized the need for authentic reading and writing experiences in early childhood to give children a sense of purpose, the opportunity to engage in meaningful and joyful experiences, and to build upon the strengths they already possess in their oral language repertoire. Her volunteer work at the domestic violence shelter where this research takes place makes her argument for connecting reading and writing with the talk of children even more poignant as she acknowledges the challenges the children faced in their lives and their need to engage with reading and writing in ways that connected with their lived realities.

Several studies have examined literacy and education interventions in the context of homelessness. The Reading Connection, a non-profit organization in Arlington, VA focuses on increasing access to book collections through specific program interventions designed to support children in families experiencing homelessness with literacy development. Research studies have been conducted to assess the challenges and success of these interventions (Hanning, 1996, 1998). Several researchers have examined how schools can support the needs of children experiencing homelessness in more inclusive ways (Barton, 1998; Quint, 1994; Stronge, 1992, Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). Other studies contribute to a body of research on after-school and summer interventions specifically for children experiencing homelessness (Noll & Watkins, 2003; Sinatra, 2007).

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

From the existing research that I've reviewed in this chapter, we know that much can be learned about the lives of families and the literacy practices they engage in when we define literacy within broad social and cultural terms. We can learn a great deal about the strengths and desires of families by examining the ways they use literacy and how their literacy practices reflect their lived realities. We understand that the variety of purposes for which people choose to read and write in their everyday lives reflect unique intentions, goals and challenges. While several studies exist that discuss interventions for supporting children from families experiencing homelessness (Barton, 1998; Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008; Hanning, 1996, 1998; Noll & Watkins, 2003; Quint, 1994; Sinatra, 2007; Stronge, 1992), the MacGillivray et al. studies (2010a, 2010b) and the Lindfors study (2008) are the only qualitative research studies I was able to find specifically about the literacy practices of families residing in shelters. In short, I have yet to find any other examples of qualitative research that further understanding about how

families choose to use literacy in their daily lives in shelters. The current study contributes to the few studies that exist, thereby providing further insight into the lives of families in a shelter, the literacy practices they value, and their beliefs and attitudes surrounding literacy shaped by their life experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the literacy practices of families in transition residing at a local shelter. The study documents the myriad ways families experiencing homelessness use literacy in their daily lives and illuminates how life in a transitional shelter can both empower and constrain the literacy practices of families. The study examines the stories from the schooling, literacy and life histories of the parents as they attempted to make sense of their lives in the context of homelessness. The methodology for this study draws from the qualitative research traditions of ethnography (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007) and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) and uses a procedure called dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2012) as an analytical tool. A qualitative study allows for the examination of how families experiencing homelessness construct the world around them through the literacy practices and events in their lives. In the following paragraphs, I describe each methodology in turn and the benefit it contributes to my study of family literacy at a homeless shelter.

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnography involves the collection, close observation and study of information pertaining to the language, artifacts, routines and rituals of a particular group of people, a process Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2007) term "fieldworking." They advise, "As a fieldworker, your purpose is to collect and consider multiple sources of information, not facts alone, to convey the perspective of the people in the culture you study" (p. 16). The ethnographic methods employed in this study are critical to understanding literacy in the everyday lives of the families.

Portraiture and Counterportraits

The qualitative methodology of *portraiture* allows me to represent the layers of complexity involved in a study of family literacy at a homeless shelter. It is important to recognize shifts in the changing landscape of the lives of families living without homes, how their experiences evolve, and how the participants construct meaning in their lives in the context of homelessness. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) say,

> Just as the portraitist needs to think of context as dynamic, she must also recognize the ways it is shaped by the people who inhabit it…in developing portraits we must also observe and record the ways in which people compose their own settings-the ways they shape, disturb, and transform the environments in which they live and work (p.58).

Portraiture helps to resist simplistic explanations of the plight of homeless families as one of job loss, illiteracy or lack of personal responsibility. This approach encourages unpacking the complexity of the historical, social, political and institutional contexts for understanding family literacy in the context of homelessness.

Meyer's (2010) process of developing *counterportraits* challenges the official portraits often portrayed through the statistical representation of marginalized groups and individuals, such as those experiencing homelessness. Meyer (2010) posits,

> Counterportraits are composed through narratives, writing, interactions and settings (contexts) and are supported by field notes and counterliteratures that consider identity, subjectivity, race, languages, interaction and more. Counterportraits are political acts of defiance and struggle with the ultimate goal of recrafting the official portrait so that is more robust, inclusive, and comprehensive (p.11).

While the official portrait of homelessness may foreground deficit interpretations of proficiency with literacy, a counterportrait approach holds promise for illuminating

the stories, struggles and desires of families concerning literacy in their lives. It is my intention that this study will help to legitimate counterportraits of family literacy for an underrepresented group in the official spaces of school and government, influencing attitudes and beliefs as well as policy concerning families without homes.

I developed counterportraits in this study to do the political work of exposing and critiquing the narrow views of literacy portrayed in official portraits, including the unexamined assumptions and deficit myths that surround families who experience homelessness (Bomer et al, 2008). Developing counterportraits allows for thick description of the layers of complexity involved in the literacy practices of families experiencing homelessness including the circumstances, interests, strengths and needs of individual families as well as the larger contexts that shape them. The counterportraits call on the listener or reader to take up the perspectives of families experiencing homelessness that are silenced by official portraits.

<div align="center">Context for the Study</div>

Located in a Mid-western university town that I will refer to as College Town, with a population of approximately 70,000, the transitional shelter that is the main field site of this study was a highly contested community issue before its construction, which was completed in November of 2010. While there was wide support for a solution to the overcrowded and dilapidated state of the former shelter location, there was a great deal of resistance in terms of where the new shelter could be built. Formerly located in an old house nestled in amongst single-family homes and rental properties just a few blocks from the community's downtown and university campus, the decision was made to build the new shelter several miles from this location in an area reputable for low-income housing and

heightened police presence. Residents of the adjacent trailer court continued to resist the location of the shelter and its occupants in the local press for months after the new shelter opened.

Visitors to the facility may find the cement floors and modern interior cold and institutional, yet the new facility offers more benefits to families than the old site. The new building is able to provide rooms for families, located in a separate wing from the women's and men's dormitories. Upstairs on the second floor there is a room devoted to children stocked with toys and books donated from community members and the local public library. A large chalkboard adorns one wall and is often scribbled with the graffiti of a toddler at the bottom. Artwork created by child residents of the shelter can often be found taped on the opposite light orange wall. An adult-size stuffed animal horse moves about the room; some days staged at the children's table eating a meal, other days lying in a heap in the corner perhaps where a young resident has used him as a beanbag or a jumping mat. This children's room and the adjacent common's area with adult size lounge furniture on the second floor of the new facility, is where the majority of my data collection took place at the shelter (see Appendix B for a map of the shelter layout).

Residents of the shelter represent people across a wide social spectrum not fully illustrated in this study. The seventy beds available at the shelter are available to both single men and women, and families with children. There are an allocated number of beds for veterans. There are four private family rooms available. Smaller families are sometimes doubled up in one of the larger family rooms when space is limited. Whenever possible, families reside together. On occasion, couples might reside in separate male and female dorms, the younger children staying with their mothers in the women's dorm when space is limited.

The diversity of the residents at the shelter extends across age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class background, immigration status, and reasons for coming to

the shelter. Although there were several families who resided at the shelter in the past year with both a mother and father, many of these families were not eligible to participate in the study because their children did not meet the minimum age requirement of three years old. Factors such as length of stay at the shelter, limited participation in the family art and story hour due to scheduling conflicts with parents' work, or hesitance to participate in the study when invited may explain why there is not greater representation from families with two parents. Additionally, although no White families participated in this study, there were parents and children of European heritage residing at the shelter during this time. Again, ages of the children, limited attendance at family art and story hour or hesitance to participate in a research study may have been factors in lack of participation from White families residing at the shelter during the course of this study.

Despite shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds that may exist between participants in the study, their arrival to the shelter is embedded in the context of their individual families, former homes, neighborhoods, and communities, and their stories represent each family's unique life circumstances. The larger social, cultural, institutional, and historical contexts of each of the families shaped their reasons for coming to the shelter and the diversity of these reasons: severe economic constraints, loss of a loved one, persistent homelessness, a need for change, the possibility of a stable and permanent home in a new community, the loss of most of their possessions, better schools, and safer streets. I do not intend for the connections and commonalities I draw across the families to be read as "homelessness" associated with race or ethnicity, rather it is my intention that readers can recognize their own hopes in the families' struggles for economic stability and emotional well-being in the context of social and racial injustices illustrated in the counterportraits.

The Official Portrait of Homelessness

Family Homelessness in the United States

The United States government Department of Health and Human Services

distinguishes between two definitions of homelessness for families, one issued by

HUD (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) and the other by the

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in the No Child Left Behind

legislation to ensure the inclusion of children experiencing homelessness in the

education system (Samuels et. al, 2010). The HUD definition is enacted to

determine whether a family is qualified to participate in HUD programs:

1. lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
2. has a primary nighttime residence that is
   A. a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for people with mental illness);
   B. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
   C. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (p. 1)

The U.S. Department of Education's definition of homelessness broadly

encompasses families living in hotels/motels and doubled-up with other families,

situations excluded from the HUD definition. This definition includes:

A. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelter; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
B. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
C. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;
D. migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this part because children are living in circumstances described in clauses (A) through (C) (p. 2).

Over 240,000 persons in families experience homelessness each night in the United States of America, according to Housing and Urban Development's 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010HomelessAssessmentReport.pdf). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education reported that nearly one million children enrolled in public school were identified as homeless during the 2009-2010 school year. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (http://www.usich.gov/) reports that affordable housing problems with subsidized housing, job loss or low wages that don't pay enough to afford housing, are the most common reasons for families becoming homeless. Other factors this report attributed to the homelessness of families include teen pregnancy, domestic violence and lack of a social support network. Additionally, the research on families who became homeless as a result of the recent economic crisis is scant, but a 2010 report for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests that the homelessness of families is more sensitive to economic cycles than individual homelessness, and the recent economic recession has led to an increase in the number of homeless children (Samuels et. al, 2010).

The statistics that represent homelessness for families across the nation are equally as startling in College Town. In a community flier released by the shelter, statistics for the 2011-2012 academic year report the College Town school district served 471 homeless students in a K-12 population estimated at over 12,000 students. From July 2011 through June 2012, the shelter reported that 629 people received 24,703 nights of shelter at the shelter where this study took place. Of the 629 people who received shelter at the site, 119 were children (citation of flier withheld to preserve anonymity of shelter name, school district and location). This number does not include children residing in other shelters in College Town that provide shelter to families due to domestic violence, mental illness and substance

abuse, as well as children who are living without a permanent residence in other settings outside of a shelter facility, as encompassed by the U.S. Department of Education definition of homelessness (Samuels et al., 2010).

During the study, I became more aware of the support many College Town citizens have for the shelter. The shelter has hosted and participated in several events to increase awareness among citizens of College Town about homelessness in the community. My attendance at several of these events has led me to believe that many of the residents of College Town are interested in learning more about homelessness and ways they can become involved as volunteers, advocates and donors. The shelter has a strong cohort of volunteers that provide weekly support to the goals of men and women and families working towards independent living. In the past month, a large rotary group approved a grant that will provide children's book collections that families can take with them when they transition to new homes. The housing authority and a local coalition group have demonstrated their concern over low-income housing regulations and discriminatory treatment of housing applications by landlords. These wide-ranging efforts indicate a strong support for fellow citizens in the community who are experiencing homelessness.

The College Town website boasts a population of "well-educated and highly-productive workers" (citation withheld to preserve confidentiality) and a thriving economy fueled by the university, the city's largest employer. The city is routinely ranked for its livability, education, safety, health, and economic viability. Absent from this portrait is the large population of people experiencing homelessness in College Town, particularly the people who seek refuge on the city's downtown plaza. The following is a description from the city's website:

> Offering big-city amenities along with small town hospitality, College Town has it all. Nestled in the heart of the Midwest, it has long served as a locus for culture, education, variety, and fun. A stroll through the downtown pedestrian plaza proves it. Here you will find a real sense of community and

friendly commerce. Downtown you might come across college students in a game of chess on the plaza's life size game board. On-lookers sit on the plaza's limestone benches talking politics, philosophy, or sports while children climb a nearby jungle gym. A block away, others might be taking a class at the senior center, lounging in outdoor cafes, savoring the fine cuisine the city has to offer. Across the way, you'll likely hear a local band playing a catchy mix of jazz and blues on the area's outdoor mini stage (website address omitted to preserve confidentiality).

This account of College Town largely dismisses the network of outreach services available to the increasing number of people on the margins of the community's prosperity. I was unable to find statistics on the median family income in College Town more recent than a 1999 report from the city's administrative office. The College Town website reports that 55.9% of residents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

A Poverty Agenda in Schools

Statistics paint an official portrait that does little to acknowledge the struggle with inequality the parents in this study experienced in their daily lives. For example, the families represented in this research study attributed their struggles with homelessness to limited access to affordable housing, safe streets and living wage jobs in their previous inner city neighborhoods. Nor does the official portrait explain the social problems that prevent families from securing homes or the larger context in which these social problems arise. Significant to my interests in the children represented by the official portrait is how the societal pressures caused by inequality culminate in more pressure on schools and teachers, particularly with punishment for schools that fail to raise achievement where the majority of the students are living at or below the poverty line (Berliner, 2014). This fuels the dominant Discourse of deficits associated with families living in poverty and what should be done in schools to "fix" the deficits.

Perhaps this is why Dr. Ruby Payne, president of aha Process, Inc. is a

prominent voice on poverty in schools. Payne has sold more than a half million copies of her self-published book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), since 1996 (Ng & Rury, 2006). A former principal in an affluent Illinois elementary school, Payne's deficit-based framework, based on her own perceptions of how people in poverty live, may resonate with teachers and school officials because it offers an explanation, although not based in sound research, as to why our system largely fails students who grow up poor (Bomer et. al, 2008). Payne's explanation lies in blaming the behaviors of students and their families rather than any societal shortcomings associated with inequality. Payne's theory fails to recognize how the oppression of poverty may lead people to make difficult moral decisions and to engage in self-destructive behavior. Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty* is the official portrait the counterportraits in this study talk back to; a much needed antidote to the string of hypothetical scenarios involving actors Payne made up for her readers to push her own agenda on poverty; one from which she has profited handsomely (Gorski, 2008).

Though not used officially in the College Town school district, several of my colleagues over the past decade have credited Payne's framework as influential on their work with children they perceive to be living in poverty. Payne's discussion of class is simplistic enough that her loyal readers may misconstrue that social class can be confined to three categories: poor, middle-class, wealthy. Payne does not talk about the broad diversity within social classes or the multiple social classes that have been identified by scholars of U.S. class structure, which far exceed the three categories Payne presents in her work (Bomer et al, 2008). Her notion of social class seems to be as simple as low, middle, high.

Additionally, Payne argues that poverty is more about a child's family's mental, cultural, spiritual, and physical resources, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules than it is about money,

characterizing poverty as a behavioral condition rather than a material one (Bomer, et al, 2008). Paramount to her argument is the notion of "hidden rules" which distinguish children living in poverty from their middle class peers in terms of values, behavior and ways of thinking about the world around them. Payne suggests that children in poverty need to be taught the hidden rules of the middle class in order to comply with school norms and achieve academically (Ng & Rury, 2006). Her classist argument does not acknowledge the persistence of the achievement gap between middle-class Black students and middle-class White students that research suggests has to do with teachers' low expectations for students of color and the lack of culturally relevant teaching they experience in schools (Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Perhaps even more alarming than Payne's claims are the welcome response and wide audience she has received for her agenda on poverty, particularly from school districts across the U.S., but also in some international communities. Payne's ongoing success with public speaking, professional development workshops, and her framework's prominence in schools requires the political work of counterportraits to debunk the deficit myths perpetuated in her work. More research is needed to challenge Payne's remarkably popular position as the official authority on understanding poverty and families experiencing poverty in the school setting, one that proceeds largely unquestioned in its content and research agenda (Bomer, et al, 2008, Ng & Rury, 2006).

Research Design and Methods

My dissertation study was conducted in three overlapping phases. The first phase involved general descriptions of the shelter facility and ethnographic documentation of family literacy experiences, including on-going participant observations of families participating in the family art and story hour. The second

phase involved semi-structured interviews with parent participants supplemented by follow-up interviews with some parents for the purposes of triangulation and member checking (Glesne, 2006). The final phase consisted of data analysis. The three phases were ongoing and overlapping. I explain each phase in detail below.

<u>Phase I: Fieldworking</u>

During the first phase of the study, I recorded field notes (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007) that described the physical layout of the building, available programs and events for families, and number of families residing in the shelter, as well as the daily schedules, rules, restrictions, and privileges regarding residency at the shelter. I recorded field notes as I participated and observed during family program offerings at the shelter. These observations mostly took place during the art and story hour I currently facilitate for families at the shelter, but also extended to other contexts at the shelter, such as before and after the art and story hour in the commons area or outside in the parking lot.

Audio recordings and photographs aided in documenting events from the art and story hour for deeper analysis and allowed me to return to these events several times for review. Artifacts such as drawings, writing samples and various print materials were collected during my visits to the shelter for the purposes of further illustration of the counterportraits.

On a few occasions, I also observed some of the families at the public library and the elementary school where many of the child participants attended in order to learn more about family literacy practices. I attended one school event with a family enrolled in the study and had the opportunity to talk with two other parents at school events. In one case, I was invited to the home of a family that had transitioned from the shelter.

Phase I began in early February and overlapped with Phases II and III as new participants enrolled in the study. I continued to enroll new families and interview parents well into the final phase of the study, data analysis. Phase I lasted nine months.

<div align="center">Phase II: Semi-structured Interviews</div>

The second phase of the study involved semi-structured interviews with parent participants (see Appendix C). Phase II began two weeks after the first participants were enrolled and continued through October 2012 with final follow up interviews. Interviews with participants were scheduled and carried out within one month of enrollment in the study. I invited parents to participate in the study based on their regular attendance at the weekly family art and story hour. I enrolled seven families in the study, but one of the families transitioned from the shelter before I could interview the parent. I invited two other families to participate in the study, but due to emotional constraints, the parents declined. I enrolled six families in the study, including seven parents and fourteen children, but only five families participated. A list of family members (all names are pseudonyms), the ages of the parents and the children, as well as the names of the places they moved from can be found in Appendix D. I interviewed six parents (five mothers and one father) from the five participant families and composed five counterportraits.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to give parents the opportunity to reflect on their stories about life, literacy and homelessness. The open-ended and less structured nature of the questions allowed for participants to share their reflections and stories in unique ways. Merriam (1998) writes,

> ...the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to

the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (p.74).

All interviews but one were conducted on site at the shelter in a private room and were audio recorded. One interview was conducted in a private study room at the public library. All interview conversations were transcribed for the purposes of coding. The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions that allowed for participants to reflect in a meaningful way on the stories they wished to share.

The nature of semi-structured interviews invited parents to make decisions regarding what stories to tell and encouraged me to listen to the participants, learn about their lives and understand why they choose to tell particular stories. Conversely, closed questions based on my preconceived notions of what I expected to find would have done little to invite the counterportraits of families and may have done more to solidify the official portraits I intended to challenge in this study. Nonetheless, the open-ended questions I posed reflected my biases, too. Therefore, when possible, I conducted follow-up interviews and after each interview I wrote a memo to monitor my subjectivity in this phase of the study.

I intended to supplement the semi-structured interviews with follow-up interviews within one month of the first interview for the purpose of triangulation of data and member checking with participants (Glesne, 2006). Member checking involves sharing interpretations from preliminary data analysis procedures with participants. I recognized the importance of participants having the opportunity to revise initial responses, express agreement or dissent with my analysis, and elaborate on their initial responses from the semi-structured interviews. Unfortunately, this aspect of data collection proved to be more difficult than I had planned. Families left the shelter, sometimes unexpectedly, and it was difficult to stay in contact with them. Phone numbers changed, people left College Town and in

one case, the parents were struggling to keep up and told me it was not a good time to talk. I was unable to follow-up with three of the families during the study.

I kept descriptive field notes to supplement the taped interviews with contextual information. Additionally, in order to monitor my own subjectivity in the interview phase of the study, I reflected after each interview through memo writing, noting my responses to the following questions: What surprised you? What intrigued you? What disturbed you? (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007). The purpose of this self-reflection was to understand how my interpretations were colored by the lens through which I filtered the parents' stories and how I selected specific stories for further examination in the final phase of the study, data analysis.

In summary, the following ethnographic methods (Sunstein, & Chiseri-Strater, 2007) were employed to collect the data:

- Participant observation and fieldnotes: within various contexts at the shelter and literacy events in the larger community
- Semi-structured interviews: attending in particular to the literacy and personal histories of parent participants
- Follow-up interviews: based on common themes across interviews with parents and questions pertaining to individual stories or responses
- Collection of literacy artifacts: writing samples, artwork, official paperwork, reading material, etc., audio recordings and photographs of literacy practices and events

<u>Phase III: Data Analysis</u>

The final phase of the study, data analysis, began immediately after the first interviews were completed and was ongoing during the data collection of Phase I and Phase II. Glesne (2006) describes the process of data analysis as accomplishing the following:

> Working with the data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link your story to other stories. To do so, you must categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret the data you have collected (p.147).

I transcribed and coded interviews to identify initial themes in the responses of parent participants. I used dialogic narrative analysis (Frank, 2012) to develop the counterportraits by identifying the stories the parents chose to tell, possible explanations for why these stories were represented in their interview responses, and what the parents' stories suggested about the identities they claimed. Document analysis and literacy artifacts helped to illustrate and deepen the counterportraits.

Coding Process

After I transcribed each interview, I listened through it, noting particular themes that stood out to me. With each subsequent interview, I mapped common themes across participant responses onto the new data set, paying particular attention to the stories parents told about their arrival to the shelter, their experiences as parents and teachers of their children, and their children's schooling. I bracketed these stories in green ink so they would be easy to identify and return to for further analysis. From there, I noted key words in the margins of each interview, which led me to identify major themes that ran through individual interviews. I repeated this process several times for each interview and then identified codes that would correspond with the themes I identified, moving through each interview transcript, coding line by line. From these themes, I narrowed the descriptions to specific categories and subcategories that best illustrated the content of the interview responses. For each interview, I kept a running list of codes, which I added to a "code book," a document of all codes that I identified during this phase of

the study. With each new interview, this list grew and when themes and categories overlapped or seemed redundant, I merged them to create a new code. I then used these same codes as I analyzed my weekly field notes from the family art and story hour, my researcher memos, and artifacts I collected in family portfolios or items families shared with me. Many of the existing codes were represented in the field notes, and new themes and categories emerged out of this part of the process. This aspect of data analysis allowed for triangulation as I drew connections between the interview responses and stories, my weekly field notes and researcher memos and the artifacts I collected or observed. For a complete list of codes, see Appendix E.

Dialogical Narrative Analysis

Dialogical narrative analysis (DNA) (Frank, 2012) allowed me to examine the stories I bracketed in the interview transcripts and what the stories communicated about the individual participants in terms of literacy and identity. DNA supports my examination of the perspectives of families living without homes through the stories parents chose to tell. I used DNA to identify patterns in literacy and schooling experiences and uncover the lives represented in the stories: the multiple voices, the identities, the vulnerabilities and the strengths of the storyteller.

The ethnographic methods of in-depth interviews and participant – observation supported my interpretation of the families' perspectives, behaviors and construction of meaning in their lives as they shared their histories and literacies through the stories they told. DNA involves recognizing the dialogue between voices in the speaker's individual story. Frank (2012) posits,

> A storyteller tells a story that is his or her own, but no story is ever entirely anyone's own. Stories are composed from fragments of previous stories, artfully rearranged but never original (p.35).

DNA also acknowledges the tension between the stories we tell and the stories that are told about us as a member of a particular group. Bakhtin's (1984) notion of unfinalizability influences DNA in that the researcher does not perceive the storytelling participants engage in as a finalized account of their lives, but rather as an unfinished dialogue which requires the researcher to listen and understand how participants attempt to illustrate what is possible in their lives through the stories they choose to tell (Frank, 2012). The collective voices of the participants give shape to a dialogue that has the potential to empower people with similar experiences. In this way, DNA serves to reveal the counterportraits of families living on the margins of political and economic power as an answer to the finalized nature of the dominant discourse that surrounds them.

An analysis or classification of stories based on types or categories allowed me to identify prominent themes across parent interviews. In particular, I was interested in examining the prevalence of Lorde's quest narrative as cited by Frank (2012). The author of a quest narrative embraces the sense that her or his life is unfinalized. The quest narrative allows the storyteller to "hold their own" in the face of vulnerability as they are "seeking to sustain the value of one's self or identity in response to whatever threatens to diminish that self or identity" (Frank, 2012, p. 33). I identified a quest narrative for each of the families through the stories of why they came to the shelter and what they believed they could do upon leaving. I refer to these narratives as arrival stories with the theme of "get yourself together." I considered the following question as I analyzed interview responses: How do the stories revealed in the interviews inform the counterportraits? Meyer (2010) writes, "Counterportraits are political acts of defiance and struggles with the ultimate goal of recrafting the official portrait so that it is more robust, inclusive, and comprehensive" (p. 11). The quest narratives in the interviews of the parents challenged the prevailing myths that they were helpless in the face of vulnerability,

framing their time at the shelter as an act of resistance to the notion of a finalized life. Likewise, they captured the ongoing struggles of the parents in the unique contexts of their lives in the shelter and beyond and their overwhelming resistance to the idea that their lives could not improve, resisting the official portrait's portrayal of them as helpless.

In contrast to the quest narrative, Frank (2012) also identified the chaos narrative in his 1995 study, *The Wounded Storyteller*. Unlike the quest narrative, the chaos narrative is best characterized by a lack of control or agency on the part of the protagonist to stop the collapse of the world around him. This classification was of particular importance to consider as I sought to understand the impervious potential of the dominant discourses that surround families on the margins of U.S. society. Deficit messages prevail in the media, schools and other powerful institutions. Countering these official portraits, which closely resemble the chaos narratives Frank describes, is a complex struggle for the storyteller. For myself as the researcher, there was a delicate balance to honor the quest narratives while staying true to the overwhelmingly steep challenge of not romanticizing these narratives as success stories. This would be a gross oversimplification of the lives illustrated in the stories. Frank (2012) explains,

> DNA sets aside, at least provisionally, the idea of people telling stories, and it thinks instead of stories imposing themselves on people, and these people then being limited to representing their lives according to whatever imagination the stories make available (p. 49).

As I considered why some stories appealed to me more than others during this phase of the study, it was important for me to frame the stories within the context of people's lives, the challenges they faced, and the stories and resources they had to meet those challenges. Therefore, I reflected on why I chose particular stories and how my choices revealed my researcher subjectivities. I reflected on

the following questions as I analyzed the interview transcripts: What stories do I impose on my readers and why? What do the stories I choose say about my views of family literacy in the context of homelessness? How do the participants perceive the stories I choose to represent in the final research report? How can my research report support an open dialogue that encourages the participants to sustain their quest of an unfinalized life in the face of vulnerability and the readers of the counterportraits to recognize themselves in the parents' stories?

Dialogical narrative analysis involves selecting stories for analysis based on the particular values and interests represented in the research. Stories relate to the original intentions of the research, the selection of stories is determined as the research develops, and the research writing is revised as new stories are encountered. I completed the last interview of the study in late October, well into the data analysis phase of the study.

I was often surprised by the hopefulness in the stories of the parents even when faced with what seemed to me to be insurmountable obstacles. The chaos narrative suggests hopelessness and lack of agency. Although the chaos narrative may be what the reader assumes would typify time in a shelter because it may align more closely with the official portrait of homelessness, this type of narrative rarely, if ever, surfaced in the stories of the participants.   In other words, the notion that their lives could not change for the better was not represented in the stories of any of the participants. Instead, I recognized resistance narratives and assimilation narratives that overlapped with quest narratives as parents shaped what was possible for themselves and their children. The tension between resisting deficit perspectives that defined people like them, and the assimilation required for them to "get yourself together," shaped the counterportraits in ways that illuminated the parents' struggles, setbacks, and determination to change their lives.

Data Analysis Techniques

I employed the following data analysis techniques in the study in addition to Dialogical Narrative Analysis:

- Memo writing (Glesne, 2006) assisted in preliminary and ongoing analysis during the data collection period. This is necessary to make connections across data points and get thoughts down as new perspectives are revealed.

- Portfolios (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007) containing artifacts from each family aided in organization and analysis of the data.

- Developing preliminary coding schemes (Glesne, 2006) aided in sorting and interpreting data early on and throughout the data collection process.

Once I finished collecting data, the memos, family portfolios and preliminary coding schemes allowed me to go deeper in my interpretations as I developed more complex coding schemes. Responses from semi-structured interviews were categorized and coded, allowing me to identify concepts or ideas central to family literacy practices and patterns of response across parent interviews.

- A code book (Glesne, 2006) was used to record and reflect the major themes and categories that emerged from the study as I read repeatedly through the collected pieces of data. I searched for multiple forms of evidence to provide justification and support for identifying initial themes and categories in my tentative interpretations of the data (see Appendix D).

Subjectivity

In order to understand my own assumptions about homelessness and the role of literacy for families living without homes, I must also examine my role as a researcher in illuminating these perspectives.

> It is not only important for the portraitist to paint the contours and dimensions of the setting, it is also crucial that she sketch herself into the context. The researcher is the stranger, the newcomer, the interloper – entering the place, engaging the people, and disturbing the natural rhythms of the environment-so her presence must be made explicit, not masked or silenced (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997, p. 50).

My subjectivity is important to consider as my observations in the field are shaped by my experiences, my biases and assumptions many of which are connected to my work as a teacher and a sponsor of literacy, a middle-class white woman and a mother of two young children. My history of teaching many underrepresented students and my interest in social justice issues influenced the ways I engaged with the families and what I chose to reveal in the research. My role as researcher and literacy sponsor further complicated what I was able to "see" in the space of the shelter. "Making the familiar strange" in terms of literacy sponsorship, while navigating completely new terrain as I talked to people about their lives in the context of homelessness posed enormous challenge. Reflecting on my biases as they emerged in the analysis of data was critical to understanding why particular stories and pieces of the data were more relevant to the aims of the study than others and increased the transparency of the ways I selected, analyzed and disseminated what I learned about the families. For the purpose of monitoring my subjectivity in the study, I used a double-entry notetaking (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007) format to record my reactions to my observations. The adjacent columns allowed me to deepen my knowledge of and raise awareness to shifts in my

perspectives, attitudes and new insights influenced by new data. Memo writing also illuminated these shifts in my perspectives more clearly.

Representing the lives of the families in this study proved to be difficult as I struggled to write on issues surrounding the participants' perspectives on homelessness, race, ethnicity, and class. I recognized several moments of tension when I was surprised by a parent's desire to privilege "whiteness" or another parent's determination to characterize her neighborhood in College Town as "low class." My initial awareness of this tension resulted in my decision to include these moments of tension in the counterportraits, despite my fear of representing the participants in ways that would sustain the deficit perspectives they were actively resisting in their stories. In *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, Alcoff (1991-1992) writes,

> Though the speaker may be trying to materially improve the situation of some lesser-privileged group, one of the effects of her discourse is to reinforce racist, imperialist conceptions and perhaps also to further silence the lesser-privileged group's own ability to speak and be heard (p. 26).

The counterportraits contain lengthy transcriptions from the parent interviews in an attempt to privilege the narratives of the parents, and to open up the possibility for them to produce a counternarrative. The goals of counterportraiture and DNA are consistent with Alcoff's argument that we should work to create conditions for "speaking with and to" rather than speaking for. The dialogue that allows for speaking with and to requires the listening Frank (2010) attributes to the reciprocal process of interpellation in narrative identifying.

The content I have selected to do the political work of the counterportrait is intended to be liberating in the sense that the parents' stories are frequently illustrated through the interview transcripts rather than my summation of their words. Nonetheless, I recognize that my transcriptions are at best an imperfect

representation of the interviews with parents. I revisited the transcriptions several times in order to record the utterances of the parents with minimal imposition of my own language structures. I attempted to reflect the actual speech of each parent without altering word choice (except in the case of preserving anonymity and differences between oral and written language), vernacular speech, and grammar. I recognize that transcriptions are not a perfect representation of an oral interview in that speakers do not speak like written text. Therefore, words like "gonna," "wanna" and "cause" were altered to represent "going to," "want to" and "because" for all speakers, including my own utterances. I made decisions about where to insert punctuation based on the intonation and pauses of the speaker and I recognize the subjectivity inherent in my determination of punctuation in the transcripts.

Conclusion

My early intentions for this study were to examine the literacy practices of families living in a shelter and how the shelter could sponsor these practices. After several weeks of data collection through participant observation and interviews with parents, I came to realize that the story I needed to tell was embedded more deeply in the social, cultural, economic, institutional and historical contexts of the lives of the participants. Trying to establish legitimacy in the literacy practices of families seemed trivial after hearing the stories of the parents in the study. Furthermore, to legitimize the language and literacy practices and the values and beliefs related to literacy would require a greater understanding of the obstacles the families endured in their inner city communities and how their particular life circumstances shaped them as literate beings. I became increasingly concerned that I would do more to simplify the lives of the families through discussions of their literacy practices, which could do little more than solidify existing notions of

functional literacy (Finn, 1999) often attributed to parents from underrepresented groups.

Regardless of the countless times in nine months that I saw mothers and fathers at the shelter reading to their children or peering at the pictures of a book while holding them, writing letters or sending texts to loved ones, filling out official documents related to housing, health and employment, and attending to the homework sent from school, I came to understand through the stories and actions of the parents and children who participated that "literacy" could not be so neatly performed by families and portrayed in my study. Literacy in all its power had to be represented in the struggles of the participants associated with growing up, learning, and parenting, in the context of their real lives, not just in the spaces offered at the shelter.

The critical importance of the counterportaits central to this study cannot be overemphasized. We can only begin to understand the complexities of literacy through a reflective dialogue with families living on the margins of our society and often on the margins of what it means to be "literate." The perspectives of families residing in a shelter provided insights into the desires and tensions they experienced in their daily lives, how these feelings were embedded in the literacy practices they chose and were required to use, and the complex ways their life, literacy and schooling histories influenced their beliefs and attitudes toward their futures. I intend for the findings from this research study to spark critical conversations around our assumptions concerning families living in shelters in our classrooms, with the hope more opportunities will exist for families experiencing homelessness to identify themselves as valued members of our community, and for our community to recognize it's potential to be full of possibility for parents seeking a better life for their families.

The quest narrative (Frank, 2012) was the most common narrative expressed in the stories of the parents I interviewed. Their lives were "unfinalized" and past mistakes and successes informed their outlook on what was possible for themselves and their children. The quest narrative was most recognizable in the stories of the parents as it suggested that the ongoing struggle was part of what made their efforts worth taking, for their children, for themselves, for the promise of a better life. Therefore, I present my analysis in three parts: In chapter 4, I identify quest narratives-stories of the participants themed on "get yourself together." These stories most often were centered on the decision to move to College Town or the shelter from the inner city or the work they were engaged in while in residence at the shelter. In chapter 5, I report stories that help to illustrate childhood and young adulthood stories, school stories and parenting stories to illuminate the larger context of the lives of each family before arriving at the shelter, highlighting narratives of resistance and assimilation that shaped their quest. Finally, in chapter 6, I examine stories told in anticipation of each family's transition from the shelter and how they perceived their lives would continue once they found homes.

CHAPTER IV

EMERGING COUNTERPORTRAITS: "GET YOURSELF TOGETHER"

"Agency can be strange, twisted, caught up in things, passive, or exhausted. Not the way we like to think about it. Not usually a simple projection toward a future" (Stewart, 2007, p. 86).

In this chapter, I draw on what I have identified in the data as the "arrival stories" of the parents in the study. In the first five interviews I conducted, parents offered up a story of why they came to the shelter when they began talking about their lives in the shelter. Arrival stories narrate why families came to the shelter, what their intentions were and events that influenced their decision to come to the shelter. The intentions for coming to the shelter reflected what the parents valued for their children and often related to the goals of improving their children's education and ensuring their safety. Reminiscent in the arrival stories of all of the parents I interviewed is the theme of "get yourself together," suggesting coming to the shelter was an attempt to change their lives for the better. This is consistent with Frank's (2012) quest narrative.

The notion of an unfinalized life, whether that be not accepting the violent streets of their former community as a way of life for their children, refusing to stay in places where they could not find work, moving so that their kids could attend better schools, or recognizing that they needed to leave their former community to make better decisions, was illustrated in the arrival stories of the parents. The arrival stories theme of "get yourself together" embraced the quest narrative in that parents considered new possibilities for themselves and their children in College Town, thereby rejecting the notion that they could not improve the quality of the lives of their families and that they must accept the way things were as the way things would always be.

Shelter Sponsorship and Agency

A community's ideas surrounding homelessness, the people who reside in shelters and the reasons why they do are shaped by what they see in public spaces. In College Town, homelessness may be associated mostly with the people who panhandle in the center of the downtown, many of whom may not reside in the shelter. The shelter facility is distant from downtown and perhaps even more distant in the imaginations of the majority of people residing in the community.

Before ever setting foot in the shelter where this study took place, I imagined a shelter setting to be a dingy, overcrowded and risky setting for children. My experience working as an elementary school teacher shaped these beliefs as I participated in conversations with colleagues lamenting the unfortunate circumstances of the children residing in shelters or the need to "double up" with other families, falling under the U.S. Department of Education's official definition of homelessness (Samuels et al., 2010).

What I learned from my time at the shelter and listening to the stories of the parents enrolled in the study is that coming to College Town and the shelter is a choice many of them consciously made to improve the life circumstances of their families. Not only did the shelter offer the families a roof over their heads, meals and a bed to sleep in, caseworkers at the shelter sponsored the families as they secured daycare and schooling for their children, provided bus tickets and transportation to and from potential employers, and referred them to possible landlords that suited the families' needs, but also considered their well being. The shelter's sponsorship in great part promoted the agency parents described when they reflected on the progress they were making while residing there.

Although parents experienced periods of hardship when they felt they could not continue to look for work after several weeks of searching, wait for their applications for housing to be accepted, or reside at the shelter for one more week,

in many ways the shelter's caseworkers helped families push through these difficult times, even when they were being rejected repeatedly in their applications for housing and employment. At one time or another, shelter sponsorship for navigating the official documents of employment and housing, as well as the shelter's policy that residents leave the shelter in the morning and not return until late afternoon, spurred their active search for jobs and housing, and provided the opportunity for parents to save a large portion of their income while residing there.

The agency in the counterportraits I present in this chapter illustrate the complex nature of homelessness and its relationship to the social, cultural and economic inequalities concentrated in U.S. inner cities. I now understand that homelessness is not necessarily something that is imposed on individuals or families lacking agency, but may be a way for families to start over with more stability, community resources and hope. Parents described to me that they learned about the opportunities the shelter could provide while residing in other states. The counterportraits that begin to take shape in this chapter give context to the places where the families transitioned from, their arrival to College Town or the shelter, and the parents' plans to change their circumstances or to do better for themselves and their children.

Jullissa and William

When I first met Jullissa, she sat reading the schedule of classes in a pamphlet for the local recreation center, pointing them out to her sons, Darius, age four and Lawrence, age six, as she read. She had the boys beside her at the table in the commons area of the shelter, while her seven-month old daughter, Ezme, slept soundly in a stroller next to the table. She spoke softly to her children.

When I approached her to ask if the kids could participate in the art and story hour at the shelter, she nodded, but assured me that they were very shy so she

would come upstairs with them. The boys went with me looking back at mom for reassurance. Julissa met us upstairs with the baby. She sat outside the children's room watching us, smiling from time to time. The boys nodded when I asked them questions, but said very little. Especially the youngest, Darius, who only showed me glimpses of a smile, raising his eyebrows in earnest at the page of a storybook or something I said.

I met with them like this for a few weeks and each week both Julissa and the boys were waiting for me in the commons area. Julissa said it was something the boys looked forward to, art and stories on Wednesday. She said since arriving at the shelter it had been "tough." She described how her oldest son, Lawrence, was acting out more. She said her younger son, Darius, wasn't eating much because she used to cook three meals a day and now she couldn't cook for her family. She repeatedly mentioned how anxious she was for their family to move into their own place.

William, the children's father, worked from 9-6 daily, preparing food for a local coffeehouse. Julissa was responsible for looking after the children. She wanted to find a job during the evening hours after William returned to the shelter. She wasn't secure with sending her children to a daycare and she voiced her concerns as she spent more time away from them making preparations for their transition from the shelter. William's brother was already established in College Town; for years William had planned how he could leave their home in Gary, Indiana, a city plagued with poverty and violence, to move "out here" to where his brother was. He referred to the place where he grew up as "out there" and this came to symbolize for me the American inner city. In this story, William describes how he struggled with not having the resources to leave his former community, but pushing for the move to happen in order to protect his family.

I always thought about it but my girl, her, she didn't want to leave because she don't want to leave her family behind so I...one time I came out here

first...a couple times I did and checked it out, but it was still kind of difficult to be on a good level because my brother, what he did. All this stuff he still do and I was like he kind of messed up...I felt like I was back in the same place I left from. So I was like it was like right back where I come from. But I thought out here I like all the stuff how it is so I would like to move out here. But I knew it was going to be kind of hard because I don't know how we can do it. It was always just some...how can we do...even if I worked and tried to do my taxes...that stuff always went bad or got messed up. When I tried to buy a car, I always mess up or something happened that like setback and we ended up staying or something like that. Like, we'll just do it next time. And then...it got to the point where I thought I would never be able to do it, but now I just pushed with all the stuff that be happening out there. I said now it's just like, we need to leave even if we be going through whatever because we going through worse out here. Like the stuff...what we going through now is kind of tough but out there is way worser. You don't want to be out there with your kids going through anything like...somebody going to end up hurt out there, for no reason. You won't even know why it would happen.

Even as I write this now, after my conversations with William and Julissa, I cannot imagine the violence and instability they described in the stories from "out there." Although the small Midwestern town where I grew up suffered the economic woes of the first decade of this century and has since been presented with the challenges of unemployment, poverty and meth production and use, during my childhood I roamed freely and safely from one neighborhood to the next, playing, studying and socializing with children from diverse class backgrounds. Taking into account that parenting has changed since my childhood in the 70s and 80s, I understand that my own children may have less freedom in their elementary years than I had. Even so, the neighborhoods of College Town provide far fewer threats to a family's safety than what William's family experienced "out there":

Ever since we brought him out here...he went to Smithville school, he like all the schools compared to out there. So he like the schools but he don't mind. He want to stay out here. He like it out here, he like how it is, it's different. Where we stayed got a good side and a bad side. Where we stayed it's bad, but when we want to have fun and do something we got to go to the other side. Like it's cleaner on their side and on their side you be in a whole 'nother zone when you be on this side but as soon as you start going back home you start feeling like, here we go, we got to like be careful right here. It's crazy.

William felt safer on the other side of town with his children than he did returning to his own neighborhood. He described lying down at night very early with the kids because it wasn't safe to be up; it was too scary to read or do anything but lie there, for fear that the children would get hurt in a drive-by or other random acts of violence in his neighborhood. William didn't get this same sense in College Town. Perspectives on the issue of a good side/bad side in College Town are wide-ranging as there are people here who have strong beliefs about areas of the community that they believe are unsafe. These perspectives are mostly shaped by the number of families moving from the inner city to this Midwestern university town that is overwhelmingly white and middle class and settling mostly on the southeast side of the city, in apartment complexes not far from the shelter. Yet from the perspective of a family that has experienced the fearful existence of living amongst the random violence and the deprivation of social and economic stability associated with the inner city, the environment of College Town, is full of possibility, as William suggests here,

> If you want do something out here...it motivates you. All you got to do is just look around you like "I want do something like that."

When I asked William why he thought it was this way he further explained:

> It's the environment, the people. It's like people got...I guess they respect their self more out here and do something for their self out here. Out there it's like they trying to kill their self out there. They drink all day, all day. They smoke stuff all day. They fight, walk around with guns. They ain't trying. They ain't trying to leave it. And they trying to kill you with it. Take you with them and you ain't got nothing to do with it. You don't want to do what they do. I be hoping that every day I wake up, I pray that I don't have to end up going back. I hope I can keep working so I can get an apartment for us and all that stuff work out because I don't want to have to go back. Because that place is depressing. It got me depressed all since I was little. And I'm still depressed. Just thinking about that place is depressing.

For many years of his childhood, William lived alone on the streets of Chicago. He did not know where his mother was. He described sleeping at different friends' homes and staying out all night, but trying not to appear homeless. He reminisced about how he taught himself to read on the streets by studying the religious pamphlets frequently given to him by members of church organizations. When he found his mother, they went to live in a church. In this excerpt from a story from his childhood, William describes the unsafe conditions of the shelters he experienced as a child and that he understands why there is a need for rules at the shelter where he lives with his family now:

> And when I did find my mom, we ended up living in this church. They used to feed us and give us clothes and stuff. The shelters out there was way worse than these ones out here. It was like a lot of stuff going up in there. They didn't want a lot of people in there and they didn't care how they run there...you can go in and out at anytime. There was a lot of people getting raped and killed around there and doing drugs. The shelter...like I understand why they got the rules. Out there a shelter you wouldn't even want to stay. You feel safer on the street.

So it is no wonder that William and Julissa did not intend to stay at the shelter when they pushed to come to College Town to provide something better for their kids. William's idea of a shelter was not a safe place to take his family. William's dilemma was complicated because he needed his brother's support once he arrived in College Town, though he didn't approve of his brother's choices. In William's view, his brother was doing some of the same things here that he was trying to leave behind in Gary, Indiana. When William's brother was evicted from his apartment after his girlfriend lost her job and stopped paying rent, William and Julissa and the kids came to live at the shelter. William and Julissa describe their family's arrival to the shelter differently. Whereas Julissa suggests that they were dropped off and left there to figure it out on their own because William's brother lost his place, William's story suggests they came to the shelter with more agency,

that he chose to leave his brother's place because he wasn't making good choices

and the shelter was their only option:

> I came out here to do better but I guess...I was going to stay with my brother, but that didn't work out. I was going stay with him and do all this stuff. But to me, he's more messed up. More fighting and getting in our business. And he wasn't doing what I like anyways. He was doing stuff that I don't like...drinking, smoking, cause I don't really like that around my kids. So that didn't work out so we just ended up coming here. Because other then that, if he would have been right, we wouldn't have been up in here, I probably would have still got a job and we would have stayed there until we could move out but he wasn't right so we just ended up in here.

Although Julissa didn't choose to come to the shelter, her arrival story to College

Town illustrates the agency in her choices to provide more for her children:

> J: So when I came out here and I wanted to move around fast because I wanted to go do everything for my kids because we didn't have no food or nothing. So I went to try to get help with food...Crisis Center, DHS, and stuff. And we had to walk and I didn't know where to go. We was lost, but we did more that day (laughs) then we have done all this time we was here.
> M: Because you needed to do that for your children?
> J: Yes. And we walked everywhere. My feet...I forgot my shoes in Gary...so my sandals was like burning the bottom of my feet (laughs) from all the walking.
> M: Yeah. Did you know about the shelter when you came here or did you find out about it when you got here?
> J: There was his girlfriend. She stopped paying rent. So they got evicted. So when they got evicted, they went to a hotel room, they dropped us off at the shelter with my kids. We were supposed to do...you know get on...get up together, but they dropped us off at the shelter and didn't come back til like two weeks later and we was already finished with everything almost.

Julissa's story of the first day she arrived illustrates a sense of

accomplishment. Her burning feet were the result of the lengths she went to so that

her children had food and other necessities, things they didn't have when they

arrived to College Town. She credited the shelter for giving them bus tickets,

helping William find a job and providing beds for them to sleep in, but she did not

want to stay any longer than was necessary. Coming to the shelter to live was

another setback in her plan "to do better":

> Things that they needed I couldn't supply that to them so I felt bad like I need to do something before...you know...be right at all. And then that's why we came here...to do better. But it's like everything going a different way.

Julissa said the shelter had changed their lives in the sense that the children were more stressed than when they had been living with William's brother and that she wanted to keep them from the fights between residents that occurred at the shelter. They spent much of their time at the shelter in their private family room for this reason. William was concerned about the fights and how some of the residents were caring for their children perhaps speaking from his own experience growing up with a mother who could not always care for him:

> I always wanted to do that. I wish my mom would have did that for me. I wish my mom would have did anything that would be right with knowing what I got to know and all that stuff. Right now at the shelter there are people just have them and don't care about them...just let them roam around like they is nothing.

For Julissa and William, the shelter represented a place that could sponsor their goal "to do better," but also a place where the stresses of instability, both mental and physical, abounded. They wanted to leave as soon as they had enough money (two months worth of savings) and as soon as they had their own place to live. As I will explain further in chapter 5, both William and Julissa's life, literacy and school histories shaped how they viewed their time in the shelter and what they would do once they transitioned to a new home in College Town.

Shana

The day Shana and I met for an interview, she had just come from her job working housekeeping at a local hotel. She had her hair pulled back in a neat bun, and her purple cardigan was buttoned over a crisp white collared shirt. We sat side

by side in lounge chairs. She giggled as I tried to make the study room on the 2nd floor a more casual setting for a conversation, fussing over how the lounge chairs were pushed up against the wall and apologizing that I didn't have any coffee to offer her. Shana took me through the rules and routines at the shelter with the authority of a shelter employee. She made it very clear that she understood the value of the space she was occupying at the shelter and how she would not take it for granted should someone else need it more than her family. The mother of three daughters, two elementary aged and one in her late teens, Shana moved to the community to improve her employment prospects and to find resources for her family.   After being laid off, she was unable to find a new job, couldn't pay the bills and lost her home in a nearby state. She heard about the shelter in College Town from a friend who had moved here 13 years earlier and never returned to her home state. Shana said she tried to show her own children how they can change their situation if they want to and explained why other people don't try to leave:

> The thing for a lot of people in Illinois and Indiana, they're scared to leave their surroundings. So a lot of people that was born and raised in Illinois and Indiana, they can't do no better. They want to do better but they're scared because they have to leave and go somewhere else to do that better that they're looking for, but they don't want to because when it's getting outside of your element, oh it's something I don't know, I don't know this place. You get scared. You want to ball up and get in a shell. But you not ever going to be able to excel or succeed like that. I try to show my kids, just like me, if I'm living somewhere and that place isn't working for me, I have to go somewhere because I don't want to find myself stuck somewhere where I can't even get the resources to be able to up and leave if I needed to.

Shana repeatedly referred to the way she tried to lead by example for her children, using her own struggles and mistakes as a young parent to help her children see how they might do things differently. She shared with me many of the life lessons she could pass along to her children so that they might do better for themselves than she had done.

Shana told the story of her oldest daughter who she sent away to Job Corp in high school because she feared she would not graduate. Shana said the friends her daughter was spending time with were not influential in positive ways and her daughter was not doing well in school:

> I sent her away to Job Corp because she needed to get out of her element. As long as she was around her friends and everything and staying somewhere where she knew everyone and everything...she wasn't doing...I guess she thought education was less important. But at the same time, these friends and everything that you're hanging around and can't get a job, they're not going to want to be your friend because a friend to me is someone that push you to do better, not worse. So I sent her to the Job Corp. So now, she's got a high school diploma, she's got a CNA certificate and now she's trying to enroll in the Army for nurse-...to be a nurse.

Shana acknowledged that it was difficult to send her child away to Job Corp and at the young age of sixteen. She said over time her daughter recognized why she had sent her to Job Corp. In this story she emphasized how she encourages her children to "want more for yourself, not less for yourself":

> She came home for a visit and she saw that the people she was hanging with still wasn't doing no more then they was doing when they left. And she had gotten a little bit older and I be using myself as an example. I had kids at an early age. Get everything that it is for you to get...education wise, stability wise, before you start having kids and everything. Don't do what I did and start off early having kids and stuff and then making it harder on yourself because that's the only thing you're going to do. I told her you're supposed to want more for yourself, not less for yourself. I said people that are around you, if they don't want no more for you than what you want then they don't...you don't need to be around those type of people. So you know, she doing real good. I always use myself as an example when I'm talking to my kids. I am a better example for them than anybody because I've been through things you know, and then I go through things and they see you know how I struggle to take care of them and everything and I'm a single parent.

Shana went on to say that she is not ashamed to be a single parent, acknowledging that her children didn't have the same father because she didn't see any sense in staying with a man who wasn't willing to help take care of his child. In another

exchange, she talked about how she wanted her daughters to grow into women that would help other people, but that she needed to teach them to look out for themselves too. This motherly advice came up throughout our conversation and could best be characterized by a strong desire for her daughters to be independent and in control of their own lives and the situations they find themselves in:

> When a situation occurs you know with them and their friends, I try to get them to see you know, why that situation happened because a person can only do to you what you let them do to you. If you allow them to do it to you, they going to do it. You have to be the person to say well, I'm not going to let you do this to me. I'm going to stop this right now because if you don't, people will walk all over you. And my daughter Mia, she is really sweet. She will help anybody and she will give anybody her last. And I-
> M: -Her last? Is that what you said?
> S: Yes, her last. I don't want to discourage her from being that way, but I try to teach her so much to be on the lookout, to be able to determine whether this person mean you any good or not, you know because-
> M: -Or because the person really needs or is just taking advantage of you. Yeah, that's tough.
> S: Yeah, but you have to because if you don't, they'll learn if they get older and sometimes it'd be too late because they will be with somebody like a man or someone for instance and that man tell them he love them and then they turn around and he gone. All the money that you had in a bank account, because you had a joint account because you trust this person so much is gone. You know, you can have a joint account, but then have your own account also. You know, stability so you have something to fall back on. You know there is nothing wrong with helping someone but you also got to help yourself too.

Many of Shana's stories took the form of advice or moral lessons for her children. She prided herself on using her own life as an example so her children might make choices that would allow them to do better than she did as a young adult. Shana saw her own struggles as an opportunity to show her daughters how they might do things differently and want more for themselves. Shana recognized the power in the example of her own life and understood how sharing these stories with her children might help shape the young women they could become.

<u>Kendra</u>

Kendra was often helping out with the babies and the young children playing in the family area when I visited the shelter for art and story hour. I watched her bounce a baby in his car seat while she read to her six year old daughter, giving the baby's mother a chance to gather her things from the room. This was not unusual for Kendra to do. She told me she enjoyed looking after other children to help another parent who was working longer hours or who was a young mother and needed a break.

The mother of two elementary-aged daughters, Mariah, 10 and Makayla, 6, and 3 months pregnant with another child, Kendra described herself as someone who loves kids and someone who kids can relate to. She shared with me that her desire to come to the shelter had to do with a need for change and to renew her relationship with her own kids after years of dependence on other people to take care of them. The girls' father died of bone cancer one year before she made the decision to come to the shelter. Kendra said they were not together, but that he helped support and raise the girls in important ways and she didn't realize how much until he was gone; school uniforms, new shoes, she had his support with things the girls needed.

When I first met Kendra at the shelter, she was in her first trimester of pregnancy and she was not feeling well for many of the early days of our acquaintance. In all that time, only once did she not sit outside the children's room and look in on our activities or participate in what we were doing. On that particular day, her oldest daughter, Mariah, composed a note for her mom with a painting of a house and a rainbow, "I hope you feel better mom." Usually when she attended art and story hour, Kendra was an enthusiastic participant, joining in to paint or draw, taking part in a reader's theatre, or reading to the little ones in attendance, just hanging out to play, read or whatever the kids were interested in

doing. Her laid back disposition was reflected in her signature flannel pajama

bottoms and the colorful dew rag on her head. She often could be seen laughing and

joking with her children and other residents. After working her shift as a house

cleaner five days a week, she returned to the shelter to meet her kids after school.

Kendra's stories are about a mother who is "learning her kids all over again" after

leaving behind the negativity in her life in Chicago and learning from her mistakes

as a teenage mother:

> K: I just needed something different. I was tired of Chicago. I was tired of being around all this negativity I got in my life so I decided to come somewhere where I don't have to worry about negativity. I changed my number. I left my family and my friends. The only people I talk to is this child's father and the people in here. I don't talk to nobody because I'm trying to get myself together.
> M: So you aren't in touch with your family?
> K: I mean I talk to my mom. I love my mama dearly. I love her dearly, that's my best friend. I find myself crying, "I want my mama" (sad voice). But my mama has been there for me too. But it's a good thing that I'm not there because if I was, I'd run back to my mama. I'm 27 years old. I'm too big to be running back to my mama. I've got to deal with it on my own. It's hard. Man it's hard. It's so hard, but I'm doing it. I'm getting it together. And if you knew how I was back then you'd be like, "you've came a long way."
> M: Why do you say that?
> K: Because I was a mess. I had my oldest at 16. So I was still a baby. I didn't get a chance to go on prom, I couldn't go out with my friends because I had this little girl that I had to raise. So by that, me doing that at such a young age, I would leave my daughter for 6 months and go live here, party, drink, all that stuff. And then when I had my baby at twenty, it was the same. I would leave her with her daddy for 6 months. I would go, I wouldn't call...well, I would call them, but I wouldn't see them as much. I just...it was so much. I regret it, but you learn from it. Like I was going to send my girls back with my mama. But I cried, I couldn't send my girls back with my mama because I haven't had a chance to bond with them like I'm bonding with them now. And it's a whole different thing when you learning your kids all over again. When you were supposed to be doing it but you weren't doing it. But now I'm learning my kids. Now I can tell you what they like, what they don't like. I couldn't tell you at first because I was too busy thinking about what I wanted to do, but now it's about them.

Kendra described her role at the shelter helping other mothers. She

emphasized that there were young mothers there that needed guidance to know

what to do for their children. She argued that kids shouldn't have to go through

something because of the choices their mother makes, using herself as an example. She also acknowledged that teen parents are still kids themselves and they need guidance to do what's right for their own children. For Kendra, the time in the shelter represented time to think, time to learn her kids all over again and time to get herself together.

Kendra was learning that her youngest daughter Makayla, loved books and hadn't ever had so many books to choose from, causing her to ask her mom to read to her much more frequently. She described how Makayla wouldn't put down one book in particular, a brand new volume of Curious George stories with a sturdy red hard cover she had chosen from the children's room. She noticed her older daughter, Mariah, was expressing herself more with drawing and that Makayla was drawing too, something she didn't realize her youngest daughter was able to do:

> K: The book collection, I don't know, I guess it's fascinating to her, but she want me to read books to her all the time. She goes into the library and she's pulling books out, "Mommy, read this to me!" So it's changed for the better, not for the worst because it's something she didn't have at home...she didn't have a lot of books so I guess it's something new to her and she likes it. So she likes me to read to her. It changed for the better for her. With writing, my older daughter, it hasn't too much, now she's drawing, she's expressing herself more. That has changed...she wasn't doing it before at home. Both of them with the drawing. I didn't know she could draw, my baby, until we got here. So it hasn't changed for the worst, everything changed for the good.

Kendra often referred to the time she had to think in the shelter. She said even though it had been good for them, the children were growing tired of living with so many other people and not having the privacy or freedom of their own home. She and her daughters were making plans for what was possible beyond the shelter.   There was talk of what they imagined their new home would be like. Makayla sketched a map of her new bedroom, where the furniture would be placed, including lamps, books and rugs. Mariah said it would be easier to do her homework because she could have her computer back that her grandfather was

keeping for her until they moved from the shelter.   Purple paint on the bedroom walls, space to think and work, a place of their own.

Melody

Melody's mother gave her some advice when they moved to what Melody referred to as the "hood" at the age of 14 after her family's home was destroyed by fire: "Just because you live in the hood doesn't mean you have to be the hood." She heeded this advice years later when she made the decision to leave that same neighborhood to protect her own son. She said she knew he would "fall to the streets." She said he saw the way young guys could make fast money, selling drugs. Melody wanted to show Martez that there were honest ways to make money, but knew this would be difficult if they stayed. She longed to buy him a used lawn mower so that he could see the value in earning money in honest ways once they settled into a small rental house with a big yard in College Town.

Melody is the mother of four children. During her stay at the shelter, her oldest son was in college on the West Coast, her son, Martez, was in 5th grade, Alex, her daughter, was in 3rd grade, and her youngest son Dylen, was four years old. Martez and Alex enrolled in after school programs sponsored at a community center and Dylen was attending preschool after being waitlisted for the first month of her stay. Melody was often on her way to drop one of her kids off or to pick them up when I was visiting the shelter. She made great attempts to have a least one or two of her children at the art and story hour. During their attendance, Martez showed me the comics he had written at his home in Chicago, the pencil and paper drawings faded with time. He discussed his homework with Melody as she quizzed him about what had been assigned. Alex read books to the younger children and often asked if she could read aloud the book I brought to share.

During the period of time that Dylen was on the waitlist for preschool, Melody said she took him with her to look for work. She said it was challenging to apply for jobs with a four-year old in tow. On many occasions I was amazed at how much time Melody spent going to pick up her children and bring them back to the shelter. Sometimes she could take a bus route, but when Dylen became enrolled in preschool, Melody used to make twice daily a 45 minute round trip walk to and from the preschool in the morning and afternoon because the bus schedule was not closely aligned with Dylen's preschool schedule.

When Melody arrived in College Town, she did not intend to stay at the shelter. Her plan had been to find a place to live, but finding housing proved to be difficult. Melody chose to go to the shelter rather than return to Chicago. She saw the shelter as a place they could go for a short period until she found a place to live. She understood that returning to the "hood" was not what was best for her kids:

> I originally came here because the area I was in...we were in a nice home but the area itself was...people were when you walked to the corner, you actually see them selling drugs to other people. And I knew this but I don't think my children knew this until one day he actually seen it for himself. He's like "Mom, the lady gave the man some money and in return he gave her some white stuff". When he said that, and we were still in the store, and I had to go and explain to him what had happened. And Martez always has been the type of child who loves money and he would do whatever he needs to make money. So he would do the odd jobs like cutting grass, the snow, cleaning up, being my biggest helper and he would earn money. And that particular day when he bring that up to me, I thought about the fast money and the typical thing in the communities I grew up in a lot of guys do go toward being drug dealers because they see it as well I can get this amount of money quicker than working a 9 to 5. And so I made the decision and so I have an older son and we sat down and talked and we both agreed it would be a great idea to come here to College Town so that he can get a feel of the slower pace in life. And so I came here and my intentions wasn't on going to the shelter because I already had housing and the process of being set up and I end up going there because when I got here it wasn't set up so I said ok, it'll be a temporary thing. And when I got there it ended up being a couple of days, a week, to months. And being there, it was a lot, it was stressful, but being here in College Town, it's a good thing because Martez's involved, all my kids are, in a lot of programs, basketball, football, the after school programs at the community center. And then as for myself, by me being a mother and trying to interact with the kids I have gotten involved at the community center so I know a lot of people there in the community and so far it has been...it's been

good. And Martez, so far he loves it here. He talks about jr. high and high school and so on so he has set up...where he sees his future. He even talked about it yesterday when we were watching the game yesterday, "That's me Mom, right there. I'm going to be playing this and that" talking about the football game and I just listened to him so it's a big difference from where we come from and here.

The possibilities Martez recognized in College Town was the change Melody was seeking for her children when she made the decision to leave her extended family and childhood neighborhood. Martez could see a future that involved possibility beyond making the fast money his mom described in their inner city neighborhood. Melody's mother had advocated tirelessly when Melody was a teen to shield her children from the violence and drugs of their inner city neighborhood through church activities and charter schools:

> And me growing up in the community I did, because I grew up in a church, that's how my mother kept her seven children out of the street. And so we were so involved in our church activities and being with our family, that helped us grow up to be different from just hanging out on the corner or selling drugs or whatever. So when I got to the point when I had children, I wanted different for them. Even though I couldn't afford it and things didn't work out financially, I did my best with locating them in different areas where they can go to better schools and try to be around certain people.

Melody held her mother's parenting in high regard, noting that she owned her own home until they lost it to a fire. She wanted the same ownership for herself and her kids, a goal she cited as a reason for sticking out life in the shelter even when it was stressful and she didn't think she could continue. A career and home ownership, although maybe a long way off, were possibilities not available to her in her former community. Here she saw them as tangible goals:

> And being here I'm doing my best with even going back to school myself and if I can work towards, ok instead of actually renting a home, my income going toward buying a home and actually having something that belongs to my children and myself. So things so far, they've been good. Like I said from the beginning we've had our ups and downs. And there's always going to be things that try to discourage you because I did get to the point where I was like "I can't take it anymore. I'm going back" but I knew in reality what are

you going back to. And that was my mindset. If I went back towards home, if I went back home, what would happen. I probably wouldn't be in school right now. We probably would be back in one of the communities that I don't want them to be in and I just think about right now and one of my goals then with going to school and working toward my goal of my career. And it's been great so far and I hope it gets better and better.

Melody often carried a canvas bag full of papers with her. She said they were papers for housing applications, school documents, job applications and public assistance. She originally found work at a cell phone company, but quit later when her kids had no place to go when the after school program ended early and she was still working. When she saw them outside in the cold at dusk at her place of work one fall evening, she didn't hesitate. She quit her job out of concern for the safety of her children. She referred to how unsafe the streets had been in Chicago and how she couldn't relax about her kids being out at night on their own, even in College Town.

When Melody decided to leave her job to pursue a college degree at the local community college, she said the manager discouraged her. He said that the job market would offer her more than college. Melody said she knew they said this to everyone. Ever since her oldest son had enrolled in college, she said she realized how motivated she was to return to school. Melody recognized that she could study and be home to take care of her children when they arrived home from school.

Melody told me she chose to study Human Service because she wants "to help people see that they can do better." She referred to people with abusive pasts, who need to respect themselves more and want something more, but are afraid of change. Melody said she wants to help people try new things and step outside of what they have always known. She shared a story about a friend who had gone out for drinks with her to a restaurant in the downtown area known for upscale shops and restaurants and businesses catering to the university students and their families in College Town. She and her friends received service that was

discriminatory and she believed it was because of how they looked. She said "I see people in my circle, the way they dress, the way they behave, the way they raise their children" and went on to say that her own friend thought the restaurant was too fancy for them. Melody told her that just because the drinks were in martini glasses and the tacos came out on a fajita plate that they were to assemble themselves didn't mean that they shouldn't be there. Melody recalled that the wait staff, on the other hand, made sure she and her friends knew the drinks were "expensive" and the chips weren't "free."   So while Melody thought College Town had a lot to offer her family, she knew there was a great deal to be done in helping people to "step outside what they have always known" in a community where some notions of diversity were valued more than others.

<u>Sandy</u>

As I pulled into the shelter parking lot on a Wednesday afternoon shortly after school started in August, I saw Sandy walking up with her daughters, Brittany, Julien and Brianna. I called to the girls to see if they were coming up for art and stories and they asked their mom if it was okay. She said, "after your homework is finished." I then initiated an invitation that we work on homework during the art and story hour. Sandy agreed that was a good idea and we all went up to the family area together.

Upstairs in the commons area outside the children's room, Sandy sat on one of the couches with Brianna, helping her with a math sheet. Julien worked on the floor at the coffee table, also on a math sheet.   I sat alongside her. She was unsure of her multiplication facts and counted on her fingers frequently. Sandy noticed she was doing this and told her to go and get her tables. I watched her rifle through her backpack and pull out a crumpled sheet of notebook paper. The paper contained a neat list of all the multiplication facts. Julien used it as a reference as she worked.

Brittany worked alone on her homework. As she worked, Brittany told her mother that the teacher was just introducing integers in her junior high math class, but this is something she had done in Texas and Chicago already. Sandy replied, "Good, then you'll be an expert."

The math was difficult for Julien.   Sometimes it took both Sandy and I to figure out what Julien needed to do to complete the math homework. I thought about how much time it would take to help three children with their homework each night when I compared it to how long it took me to help my first-grade son, even with my live-in brother's help with childcare and my husband's support. Julien needed support with math, but she didn't complain about doing the homework. None of the girls did. When Julien finished and there was little time left, she asked if I would read a story. Brianna hadn't finished her math sheet. I noticed she didn't protest or ask her mom if she could join us. She kept working as Sandy looked over her shoulder and offered her assistance.

This snapshot of Sandy's family's homework routines is illustrative of their everyday approach to and attitudes toward the work assigned at school. Even after Sandy found full time work and she could not attend the art and story hour with the girls, they never forgot to remind me that they needed to complete their homework first before we decided upon an activity. On a regular basis, I would arrive to the shelter on Wednesday afternoons to find the girls sitting in the downstairs commons area quizzing each other on their weekly spelling words. Brittany questioned her younger sisters about what other homework they had, running down the list of subjects in an attempt to jog their memories just in case they forgot what was assigned that day. Brittany administered, checked, and scored practice quizzes for her younger sisters complete with percentages and letter grades. When they fell short of an A letter grade, their older sister directed them to study the

words they had missed again, echoing her mother's voice, while she was away at work.

I met Sandy well into phase three of the study. I didn't expect to enroll more families at this time, but Sandy attended the art & story hour every week with her children, Brittany, a seventh grader, Julien, a fifth grader and Brianna, a third grader and complicated my initial interpretations in some critical ways: Sandy and her children had regular literacy routines that mostly had to do with school work and Bible reading; her case manager praised her efforts with pursuing work, schooling and housing; and she and her children were optimistic about life in College Town. Yet, in my first interview with Sandy, I learned she had been homeless for nearly two years, in and out of shelters in Chicago, doubled up in apartments in Chicago and Texas, and that she took a train across the country and attempted to settle in her own place in Niagara Falls, NY, where she had another friend who had "made it." She described her short time in Niagara Falls as a place where she felt lost and returned to Chicago after her family encouraged her that things would improve.

Upon returning to Chicago, Sandy said things just seemed worse, not better. After doubling up with a friend who eventually asked her to move out, Sandy and her three daughters took up residence in another shelter housed in a church. She purchased a car, but two months later came out of the shelter to find it had been stolen. All of her possessions but the clothes she and the girls were wearing and her laptop computer were in the car, including her son's graduation pictures and baby pictures of her children.

Sandy said she didn't know what else to do, but she had to leave Chicago again. She arrived at the shelter in College Town after looking it up online. She said it was scary at first because she had nothing and she didn't realize they wouldn't be able to get in right away. The first two nights she tried to get shelter, the facility was full and she had to get a hotel room. Sandy said she didn't have money, so a resident

at the shelter loaned her the money. She didn't know him. Sandy said it was easier in College Town and the shelter was much better; no bed bugs, private rooms for families, and they pushed you to get a job and find a place. Yet heading into the final month of her stay at the shelter, she was growing tired of the constant refusals of her rental applications for low-income housing, and spending Sundays, when public transportation wasn't available and they had to leave the shelter, in a booth at the nearby grocery store deli with her children. She missed her family who were pushing for her to return to Chicago again. She said they couldn't do much to help her. They were struggling too.

Members of her immediate and extended family called frequently to offer advice and support. She said she was on the phone with family members every night. Her aunt was trying to find her a job in security. Her mother said Sandy and the girls could stay at her place. Her sister offered to pay for their bus tickets home. While in the first couple of months of Sandy's stay, she had a positive outlook on her decision to move to the shelter and then find her own place; in the weeks leading up to her departure from the shelter, she insisted she wanted to return to Chicago and had given up on the idea of meeting her goals in College Town.

I observed a shift in Sandy shortly after I interviewed her a couple months into her stay at the shelter. I noticed Sandy crying on the phone during a couple of my visits in the last month of her stay at the shelter, and instead of coming to art and story hour with the girls when she got off work early, I sometimes observed her with her head down at one of the tables downstairs. On one particular day, she came upstairs with us, but she sat on one of the couches with her head down, and her hair uncombed. She seemed less responsive to her children as they frequently asked about her to see if she needed anything. I had not ever seen her this way.

Sandy said less to me in the last month of her stay and resisted my attempts to advocate on her behalf when she mentioned that she just couldn't find a place to

live and there was nothing else to do but to return to Chicago. She said little about her decision to leave, even after the head case manager at the shelter offered to extend their stay because Sandy had done everything she was supposed to, but hadn't secured housing. Although Sandy had explored many avenues for improving her life in College Town, from filing for financial aid and transferring credits for her application to a nearby community college, to saving for weeks after working a temp job sorting mail and then a permanent position at a fast-food restaurant, she was resolved to go back to Chicago, a place that had left her homeless for nearly two years.

> M: So when you made the decision to move, and if any of this you don't want talk to me about that's fine too...when you made the decision to move here, what did you imagine for yourself coming here with your kids, coming to College Town?
> S: Doing better. Getting a job. My own place.
> M: And in Chicago that had been something you were working towards but it just wasn't happening?
> S: No, not at all. I mean I was doing applications everyday all day with nobody call. And that's the first thing I was trying to do, get a job so I could get in my own place. I had been in school since '08 and so getting the certificates and being certified and stuff, but with nobody hiring.
> M: So what kinds of things were you studying for certification?
> S: Um, CNA, phlebotomy, I was also in school for nursing, LPN. And I had like two more classes until I could be in the program.
> M: And why did you stop?
> S: Because I was coming out here. And I was going to continue.

Continuing her schooling proved to be difficult, as the local community college did not offer all of her classes in nursing. Sandy would have to go to the location a thirty-minute drive away to take some of her required classes to pursue a degree in nursing, something she started in Chicago. Without a car, this was not a viable option for Sandy. Returning to Chicago held more promise for continuing the education she began to pursue after returning for her GED in '08. When I asked her about what she desired for her family when they returned to Chicago, she reflected on her former neighborhood:

> M: So when you go back, if you go back to Chicago, what do you want for yourself and your children there?
> S: Just to live right. I probably look into going in the suburbs somewhere because my best friend he stays in the suburbs and it's real nice out there. Quiet. So I might be going probably that way if I go back.
> M: So when you say, try living right. What do you mean?
> S: Like in a better neighborhood. Making sure that they're safe. They're able to go outside and I mean you don't have to worry, because it's not safe everywhere but, better than where we was at.

Sandy described her former inner city neighborhood as:

> S: Shooting. Gang-banging. Drugs. Everybody standing out partying. Music. And I didn't want to be around that no more.

When I asked Sandy about what it was like to live in such conditions she told a

parenting story about how she protected her son from the streets:

> M: When you were in the neighborhood that you left...that you said was...you know the shootings...what was it like living there with your children?
> S: Scary because I have a son and you know...I didn't want him to be like how the other men were so he used to always say, "you don't never let me go outside." I didn't. I never let them go outside unless I was out there with them in the parking lot. If we not going out anywhere together, then no. Nobody's going outside.

Sandy turned to the streets at the age of 16. Raised by a deaf mother, she

described her mother's parenting as uncaring. Her mother made the decision to

move to Milwaukee when she was fifteen, taking only her youngest siblings with

her, leaving Sandy and her thirteen-year old sister behind to stay with friends and

family. Embedded in this exchange about her decision to turn to the streets, is a

story Sandy shared about when her mother told them she was moving without her

and her younger sister when they were teenagers:

> M: Well I mean with the teacher...do you think if you would have had more teachers like the seventh teacher you described, do you think you would have been less likely to-
> S: -No, I think if my mother was more like...was strict maybe or showed that she cared I wouldn't have went that way. I had my grandma and them but

they would always try to criticize instead of ...except for my auntie that passed away. She was a little bit more different and I wish I would have listened to her.

M: Your mom and your grandma would criticize you?

S: Not my mom. My mom would just act like she didn't care. My grandma would criticize all the time. My auntie that passed away, she wouldn't of. She used to always sit and talk to us and tell us you know school is important and try to do this and that before it get too hard. Because back then it was easy and we wouldn't listen to her. I wish I would have.

M: When you made the decision to drop out, was it scary? What was it like?

S: No, I just didn't go back any more. Yeah, I knew my mother wasn't going to say anything. She basically, when she move, we couldn't even go with her. I was fifteen at the time. And my sister was...if I was...she was 13. And I...my mom just moved and she took my brother and my baby sister and told me and my other sister that's under me where we going to go and we trying to explain to her "We young. We fifteen and thirteen. We got to go with you." But she didn't take us. She left us and my thirteen year old sister, at the time thirteen, she had to go move with a friend of hers and I moved with my auntie.

M: And this was the auntie that passed away?

S: No, my other auntie. But I used to stay with the auntie that passed away too. You know we was back and forth, because they used to always say "Your mother have to get you all."

M: So you never felt like you were in...in your home.

S: So it was like I might as well turn to the streets.

M: So did you live on the streets?

S: No, I didn't live on the streets. I lived at people's house.

M: Just went from house to house? And how long would you say you did that?

S: Until I got my own. Yeah, my cousin, we was in our own place at 16. Then after that I was pregnant. I had my first child at 18. And then I was at his dad's house on up until I got my own place in 2000.

M: And you said you were there for ten years then?

S: At the place that I was...mhm.

M: When you got a place at 16, how did you do that?

S: I don't know (sigh). I mean you know just...selling drugs...me and my cousin. Keeping up with the bills.

Sandy was a teenager when her mother moved away without her. She was a teenager when she first lived without a permanent residence. She was a teenager when she dropped out of school and turned to the streets. She was a teenager when she sold drugs to afford a place to live and to keep up with the bills. She was a teenager when she had her first child. Now she was trying to change things so that her own kids could "live right." She wanted to celebrate Christmas this year and in

their own place, with presents for her children. She wanted her children to make

better decisions than she and her mom had:

> M: Ok. What do you imagine for your kids...let's say as readers and writers
> now...what do you imagine for them in the future. Where do you see them in
> the future?
> S: I'm hoping better than what I put them through. You know I'm hoping
> that they stay in school and that they don't have no kids and don't start
> dating. Wait until you get a career and you are able to take care of a family.
> And I just hope that they...stay focused. I don't want them to do what my
> mom did and what I did.

The care her aunts showed for her growing up may have influenced Sandy's

desire to return to Chicago to care for her young nephew. Sandy wasn't just

concerned for her own children, but she felt an obligation to look after her six year

old nephew because she had made a promise to her brother who was sentenced to

federal prison for ten years. Sandy described her nephew's mother as not right to

take care of him. She said her nephew was getting in trouble in school and she

feared he would go the way of the streets. Sandy described her brother as a good

father who turned to drug dealing when he lost his job as a supervisor at Walgreens

after a "drop" revealed that he had marijuana in his system. She said the FBI was

watching him for weeks and that more than twenty people were arrested and

sentenced. When I asked her why people turn to drug dealing, she explained how

many people struggle economically:

> M: Why do you think your brother was selling drugs?
> S: Uh, because he lost his job for one. He was working at Walgreens. He was
> doing good (rising intonation). He was a supervisor, a manager. And he lost
> his job because they did a drop. And he was tested for marijuana in his
> system and he lost it, so from that point he was trying to figure out how he
> was going to pay the bills, and take care of his son so he went and
> did...started selling drugs.
> M: And is that...do you think that is a...a common reason why a lot of
> people...they get involved in the drug dealing?
> S: Because they need money. Yeah, it's...it's kind of hard in Chicago though.
> It's hard. Everything is just pricey. If you not working and if you ain't got no
> career making good money or something then it's a struggle.

I wondered why she would want to return to an environment that held so little promise for her and her children, but I understood her concern for her nephew and her desire to be near her family. Her own teenage son had gone to live in Missouri with his father when she left Chicago the first time. She wanted to be reunited with him as soon as they were settled. Sandy wasn't concerned about her son turning to the streets. She described him as a good kid who didn't like gang-banging , drinking and smoking. She said that's how she brought him up. Chicago, as I had come to know it outside of my touristy trips to the museum campus with my own family, seemed like the last place she could reach her goals and care for her children and her brother's child. It seemed to me like returning to Chicago was giving up on what she had achieved while staying at the shelter.

For Sandy, the theme of "get yourself together" didn't quite fit. Despite the praise I heard from shelter staff about Sandy's efforts and parenting, and how frequently I observed her filing applications for employment and housing, she wasn't resolved to stay in College Town when she came so close to reaching her goals. Sandy's case manager was optimistic that despite her credit report, they would find housing for her. She had a job and had saved enough money for a security deposit and a couple months rent in College Town. This same amount of money would not stretch as far in Chicago. The head of case managers at the shelter met with her privately and offered her the opportunity to stay beyond the ninety-day limit because Sandy had been so responsible, but she was tight-lipped and unwavering in her determination to return to Chicago. I wondered how it could be better returning to Chicago. I struggled to understand why she refused the shelter's offer to extend her family's stay when she was so close to seeing her efforts pay off, but I had to respect her decision to leave. I also had to reconcile my own simplified notions of what it means to "get yourself together" and at times, my own tendency to think of agency as "bootstrapping."

Conclusion: The Complexity of Agency in Homelessness

The emerging counterportraits in this chapter illuminate the wide-ranging challenges, motivations and actions involved in the five families' decisions to move to another state, leave family and friends and their familiar surroundings, even if it meant living in a shelter. The counterportraits also suggest the agency in homelessness that is absent from the official portrait of families who reside in homeless shelters.   Individuals and families experiencing homelessness are often portrayed as victims rather than people making proactive decisions to improve their lives. The data challenge this official portrait again and again. Although homelessness was a hardship and a stressful circumstance for the families in this study, the shelter offered an alternative to remaining in neighborhoods and communities that were a threat to their well-being, garnering a sense of agency. Sandy's counterportrait complicates agency. Her efforts, while focused on changing the life circumstances of her family, led her back to the same place that had rejected these efforts to begin with.

The shelter sponsored parents by supporting them with finding work and housing and filling out applications required for both, securing childcare and schools for children, and providing opportunities that Kendra, Shana, Melody, Sandy, Julissa and William realized would not have been possible if they had remained in their former communities. Additionally, the shelter required the residents to save a large portion of their income while residing at the shelter in order for them to be more likely to sustain independence from the shelter after transitioning to a new home. Access to good schools for their children gave Melody, Julissa and William hope for what their children might achieve with new opportunities. A chance to save for the future gave Kendra and Shana an optimistic outlook on what they could achieve once they transitioned from life in the shelter. The opportunity to save money gave Sandy a temporary safety net when she made

the decision to return to Chicago after weeks of hard work in temp jobs, but repeated rejections of her rental applications for housing.

Yet this sponsorship was limited in significant ways, too. Melody and Julissa routinely expressed concerns over the well-being of their children in the shelter, living amongst so many strangers, many of whom they perceived to be mentally ill or recovering addicts. Restrictions on how the families could live at the shelter, how, where and when they could move throughout the building, gave Sandy, and her three daughters, Brittany, Julien and Brianna, little choice and space for how they spent their time, particularly on Sundays, when there was no public transportation running and they spent their days at a nearby grocery store deli. Shelter staff advocacy on behalf of the families could not alone overcome the discriminatory practices of some of the landlords in College Town, advertising in Chicago newspapers, preying upon residents who were anxious to transition from the shelter by offering them low rents in apartments that were not well-maintained or denying others housing who had unpaid utility bills or an outstanding medical bill on their credit report. Concurrently, personal agency was both empowered and constrained for parents through the shelter's sponsorship of the goal to "get yourself together."

The stories parents shared with me capture the unique ways they narrated their lives. In these stories are notions of what counts for the parents and how they make sense of their lives before they moved to the shelter, during their stay at the shelter, and as they reflected on what was to come. Frank (2002) writes,

> The local and contingent solutions that people have found to how they should live are expressed as stories that recount past attempted solutions to how they should live and are part of their ongoing attempts to seek present ways of living (p. 3).

The stories they shared in the interviews gave the parents a window into their own lives, in the sense that they could reflect and recognize the stories they told validated their lives beyond the context of homelessness. Shana expressed this best at the end of her interview after I asked her if we could talk again,

> S: It's ok. I'm fine. Um, if you want to ask me more questions after you listen to this, it's no problem. You know, um, it's kind of nice to have someone interested in you other than like Public Assistance or something like that. You know, when you trying to get something but they got to know any and everything about you before they say ok you can have this or no you can't so...

My perspectives were constantly challenged as I read and reread the interview transcripts, reminding myself of the humanity of the lives represented therein. "Stories give lives legibility; when shaped as narratives, lives come from somewhere and are going somewhere" (Frank, 2002, p. 5). The official portrait of homelessness does not give lives legibility. Rather, it narrows the public view of homelessness to statistics marked with deficits. The current climate of neo-liberalism which privileges markets over people, pushes numbers and dismisses stories, denies the role of stark inequality in the lives of people who fail to take up the role of a good citizen; a good consumer. The bad credit some of the parents struggled with was not due to large credit card balances and living beyond their means as so many of us in the middle class are prone to do. The head of the shelter's case managers told me that she had reviewed hundreds of credit reports for clients at the shelter and their financial missteps had mostly to do with meeting day to day needs associated with health care and housing.

Stories frame these ongoing struggles with our common humanity as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. I have no idea what it is like to walk all day, so long and so far that my feet burn to find food and clothing for my children, like Julissa did the first day she arrived to College Town. I can no

longer escape how trivial it seems to fret about not enough yogurt or juice in the refrigerator when I consider what it must be like to have to tell your children there is little or nothing to eat. My motherhood supported the dialogical nature of storytelling; I listened not just as a researcher, but as a parent, listening to the struggles and the hopes of another parent. My struggles shrunk in the presence of these narratives and taught me a great deal about how much I deny my own privilege from day to day. I recognized how I used stories to justify my actions and decisions as a parent, as I observed the parents in the study narrating their lives in ways that projected identities they wished to take up. Most importantly, the notion that there can be one grand narrative or official portrait to explain homelessness was resisted in the parents' attempts to "hold their own" or to narrate an "unfinalized" life, and to claim identities through the stories they chose to tell about parenting, schooling and life in their former neighborhoods.

CHAPTER V

CHALLENGING DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES: IMAGINING, RESISTING AND SUSTAINING

IDENTITIES

"People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell
themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are"
(Holland et. al, 1998, p. 3).

The emerging counterportraits in chapter 4 describe the arrival stories of the

families and the parents' quests to do better, particularly for their children. This

quest involved the identity work that resisted deficit perspectives about what it

means to be homeless. The parents in this study were also very aware of the

stereotypes that existed in the College Town regarding their arrival, their residence

at the shelter and in some cases, their ethnic or class background. Shana, William,

Melody and Sandy identified themselves as either Black or African American. Julissa

identified herself as Puerto Rican. Julissa and William, Sandy, and Melody

specifically referred to the turbulence of their lives in their former inner city

neighborhoods.

In this chapter, the counterportraits continue to take shape through the

narratives of school, literacy and life histories. In many instances in the interview

phase of the study, parents attempted to separate themselves from the deficit

perspectives dominating the official portrait and to resist the identities that were

likely to define them in the community and at their children's school, grounded in

the places from which they came. William shared his perspective about people in

his former neighborhood:

They ain't really doing nothing. They can walk up out of that place and do
something, but it's a better place than just standing there all day fighting and
doing stuff like that. So they want to take what you got just because you want
to do something better or they don't care and they going to...I don't care I'm
just going to take whatever I need or harm anybody because they feel hurt.

> They could do something better than just standing there like that or act how they act. To me, I think that's what wrong with a lot of black people. That's why I think a lot of people don't like black people cause black people make worser for they self. They don't try to do nothing. Just because you dropped out of anything like that don't mean you could just...you just down cause of that. If you still alive, you can do anything you still can do. You still can do it but they don't do it. They rather sit there and be mad at the world because they ain't doing nothing so they take it out on you or anybody that come their way. That's kind of stupid. And if you look at a lot of black people do that. Everywhere they go, that's what they do. They make trouble for everyone. And I'm Black and I know that.

William's portrayal of Blacks in his former neighborhood in Gary, Indiana, suggests that the people there feel they have little control over the course of their lives and that their lives are finalized, yet William posits within this narrative that "If you still alive, you can do anything you still can do." William's resistance to the finalized narrative of the inner city is answered with his quest to change his life for the better. His assessment of the lives of Blacks living in the inner city is consistent with neoconservative perspectives that reject welfare initiatives as well as discussions of increasing income disparities in the U.S, racial inequality, and its relationship to widespread social problems, blaming individuals for lack of personal responsibility. William's resistance actively dismisses the inequality that has made his quest so difficult by blaming other people who are in a similar situation but have given up hope. Shana's perspective following was also marked with deficits:

> Yeah, but African American people...they is very envious of one another and we as a people it's a wonder we made it this far because we hurt each other, we steal from each other but we'll be quick to help somebody else. But our own kind, it's ridiculous.

Sandy also took up the deficit discourses surrounding Blacks from her inner city neighborhood and discussed her children's perspectives on the diversity of College Town. Sandy told me that the first thing she noticed about College Town was "the diversity." She said her children liked being around more Caucasians.

S: I just like it because it's diverse.
M: Say more about that. What do you think?
S: It's cool. I see more Caucasians.
M: Ok. Than you did in the neighborhood where you came from?
S: Yes.
M: And that's a positive for you?
S: Mhm.
M: Can you say why?
S: Because my kids...they always say I want to be around the Caucasian people, you know. And my son-
M: -And do they say why?
S: They say they're more better than the Black people.
M: And what do you say to that?
S: Well, uh...I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. But my son he said it all the time, "I want to be around the...the white people. I want to hang with them because they're more fun and they don't be on bad things trying to gang bang and stuff like that."
M: Um, when, as a mom, and hearing your kids say that, does that make you sad? Does that make you-
S: No, not at all.
M: So what...do you think it has to do with-
S: -Probably the neighborhood that we grew up in, you know, all the stuff that they seen, and people getting hurt, is always Black on Black, you know.

Sandy attributed her children's privileging of "whiteness" to growing up in an inner city neighborhood and the violence they witnessed there. Her response suggested a deficit perspective of Blacks as less moral than Whites and resisted her association with the immoral behavior of the inner city she described. Sandy did not contest or attempt to complicate this deficit perspective by mentioning the relationship between racial inequality, economic segregation, poverty and violence in the inner city (James & Kotlowitz, 2011), but instead took up the perspective that sustains the historical struggle for racial equality and a post-racial political discourse in the U.S., a perspective that works against her and her children.

Identity Work through Storytelling

The stories parents chose to tell me represent the identity work they were engaged in as they attempted to separate themselves from deficit perspectives associated with their former inner city neighborhoods. Stories related to being a

role model for their children, valuing education, teaching children at home, keeping children safe, and advising children on how to live their lives for the better reflected the life, literacy and schooling histories of the families and what possibilities the parents imagined for their own and their children's futures. Through the act of storytelling parents saw themselves as teachers, learners, readers, role models and advocates for their children. Frank (2012) argues that storytelling allows people to "hold their own" which means to contest identities or Discourses that threaten who they see themselves as or who they want to become. He writes,

> Holding one's own is a response to vulnerability; sometimes this response is spontaneous, other times it can be strategic and reflective. Storytelling is an act in which people hold their own, but also, the stories that people know set the parameters of what they can imagine as their own to hold (p. 46).

The parents described how they were different from many people who were from their former communities or neighborhoods and sometimes how they were not like the other people residing at the shelter. The data show that parents were attempting to sustain a narrative of improving their lives for themselves (the quest to do better) and part of this quest involved a resistance narrative parents used to distance themselves from the deficit discourses surrounding people experiencing homelessness and people from the inner city. Leaving extended family behind in their former communities and moving to a shelter represented the parents' desire for change. Their rejection of the notion that their lives were finalized and could not improve was illustrated in their action to leave places they associated with the prevailing deficits they actively resisted as part of their quest to do better. The data show better schools, safer streets, secure housing and the opportunity to "live right" were the possibilities the parents imagined in the quest narratives illustrated in stories on life in their former neighborhoods and the possibilities a new community could offer them.

Better Schools, Teachers

The deficit perspective entertained by some of the parents regarding their ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds is grounded in the devastating inequalities most evident in the inner city neighborhoods and schools from which they came. William wanted his son to have a better school experience than he had, but realized not much had changed from the time he was an elementary student. Here he tells a story about how his son's experience was not much different from what he experienced in the inner city as a child:

> That why I wanted my son to go to a different school. The teachers out there do crazy stuff. They try to hit them more, they try to scare them more. The teacher don't make it fun. They try to paddle them to scare them just because a lot of kids are hyper and move around, every kid like that. That's why he never did like to go to school and I used to wonder why until I went up there and saw they got these big ole sticks and stuff. That's why he don't want to be up in there. Why do you be trying to scare them, they be hitting the desks real loud. What kid want to be there, what you trying to teach them? They ain't going to be paying attention. And I thought that's kind of how my school was. It was the same way. So you was looking at more what they was going to do to you then what they was drawing on the board.

This account is consistent with Julissa's concern for their son's well-being at school before moving away from the inner city, illuminated in this story:

> They was really rough with the kids. They paddled them with a big paddle, this big. And they talk to them like they was not kids...like "oh, you're not going to be nothing" or "your mama this and that" to another student and I didn't like that. And then my son always been quiet and I told him to talk to the student so he can have friends and when he really did it, the teacher hit him with a big stick...like this big...and his hand...it was bruised.

William wondered how teachers could be paid to scare children, to make them want to be bad because they didn't care about them or what happened to them. He and Julissa wanted better schools for their children. William understood that if they stayed in their former community, his son's experience would be much like his own. Both William and Julissa regretted not finishing high school. They recognized their

children needed to accomplish much more than they had to find good jobs and their opportunities would be severely limited if they stayed in Gary.

Other parents in the study discussed the link between teacher expectations and the caring disposition of teachers. Shana was curious about what made a teacher care:

> Well, I've often always wondered because like in the public schools, you have like 50/50. Fifty percent of the teachers that care and fifty percent that don't. And I know you can't speak for all teachers...but I wonder what...probably the kids...I probably answered my own question...What makes teachers stop um...care...I guess caring about their profession? I guess at some point they used to be passionate about being a teacher but now it's pretty much I'm coming to get a paycheck whether this kid is learning or not and they don't care.

She went on to comment on the confusion over vouchers, the discriminatory practices related to the voucher system and the push to label schools and privatize education in her former community:

> Because um, they have started doing a lot of schools...and this is because they don't want them...they don't want bad kids quote unquote to go to these schools so they started doing this test where the kid got a score of a certain amount to be able to go to this school. So underprivileged kids, if their parents are not spending the time with them and teaching them and their relying on the teacher to teach them, they would never be able to learn everything that they are to learn and then a lot of the kids, they place the great...you know the really good teachers in the schools where you have to take the test and they tell you to take the test but that's because they know you're not going to get in there because where you living there...where you from...and most of the time you write your name down...you set an appointment, they look up your scores and stuff and they know you're not going to make it in that school. But I think they should give kids more help, more help. I mean I know government...I know funding is messed up and everything, but I think they should stop labeling the schools the way they do. Like this is a magnet school, this is a public school, charter school. I think they should stop labeling the schools like that because then that causes things between kids because they think that they're better than this kid because they go to this school. Well my mom paying all this money for me to go to this school and so that makes me better and everything when school's supposed to be to learn and to help a child to get further in life. But it's like now they putting labels on everything. It's like its' going away from learning to me.

Shana's concern over the privatization of public education demonstrates the value she places on learning versus the competition that characterizes the admission requirements and voucher restrictions for charter schools (Ravitch, 2010). She defined school's purpose as "to learn and to help a child to get further in life." Unfortunately, the disparities in the public schools the children in the study attended compared to the schools in College Town illustrate the stark inequalities that exist in the U.S. public school system often divided along race and class lines and perpetuated by low teacher expectations for children of color to be high-achieving (Kozol, 2005; Delpit, 2012). During the writing of this report, the first strike in twenty-three years by the Chicago Teacher's Union shone a spotlight on the conditions of the public schools in the inner city, the children who attend them and their teachers.

Melody's mother made many attempts to keep her kids out of the public schools in her Chicago neighborhood and Melody did the same for her own children. She viewed the charter system as a better opportunity for them to get out of their "typical" neighborhood environment. The charter system led her oldest son to a full-ride scholarship at a small college in California. Melody was convinced this would not have been possible if he had attended the public school in their neighborhood. She felt the same way about her own education in charter schools. She believed her charter school education had kept her and her siblings from "falling to the streets." Here Melody explains her reasoning for sending her kids to charter schools; embedded in this explanation is a story about her son, Martez, trying a cigarette with one of the neighborhood kids:

> But what made me go charter was the public schools in the area I was in, it's the typical neighborhood kids, as we call them. So it's like instantly, if you're in the neighborhood, they put you in your neighborhood school. And once the neighborhood kids in the communities that we lived in like,(pause) really wild. The really wild bunch goes to the neighborhood school. And then if you have the opportunity to go to a charter school or a private school, it's a

good thing. One because you're out of your environment, two because the school, like I said the school they attended would teach them a grade ahead so they're being taught in advance, three the atmosphere of being in a private school, even though it was charter, where a lot of neighborhood schools you did wear the basic clothing because of gang...whatever. But the private school, with the...you know I've always felt like it makes a child feel different, think different. And I think if they had stayed in public, a lot of things that the neighborhood kids did on a regular...because a lot of the kids in my neighborhood, I wouldn't allow them to play with and that's because they did do the things they seen in the neighborhood. Because Martez actually before we came with the little boy that lived down the block was caught in the backyard and the little boy was smoking a cigarette and handed it to Martez and my neighbor, which was an older man caught them so he came and told me about "He was about to smoke a cigarette with the little boy down the street. You need to watch who he hang with." Which was true. So meanwhile I talked to him about being a follower, the dangers of smoking, why would you do this? So things that was going on in the community I knew because I talked to him and his sister about being followers and being a leader.

Melody's portrayal of an inner city neighborhood illustrates the pull for parents to abandon their neighborhood schools in hopes for a better opportunity for their children. Whereas Shana viewed the charter system as one that stirred up competition and led some parents to believe their kids would do better or were better people because of their charter school education, Melody believed the charter system could give her children another perspective that they might not have the opportunity to see in their neighborhood. She also clearly felt her children needed to be protected from the activities of the neighborhood as her mother felt raising Melody and her brothers and sisters in an inner city neighborhood facing similar problems. Shana argued that private school cannot be a buffer for kids and that eventually kids are going to be curious about what's going on around them.

But my little cousins, they go to private school, they pay all this tuition at these schools and everything and that makes them better, right? Ok, I got an eighteen year old daughter. She's in Job Corp...don't have any kids. My cousin and them have a...I think she is nineteen now...dropped out of college...pregnant now. For all that money that you paid going to a private school just to say that your kid is better than mine, it didn't do nothing to the mind. You know, that's what people fail to realize. I know you want better for your kids. You want more for your kids and everything...there's nothing

wrong with them. But by doing more for your kids, don't try to teach your kids that they are better than everybody else or they supposed to be with this type of crowd just because you know they going to these schools or whatever. Because a kid, a person period, always going want to know what makes this person different from me. Why do they do these things and I don't? So quite naturally, the stuff that you try to keep your kids away from, they're going to run to.

Despite Melody's determination to keep her kids from playing with the children in her neighborhood and sending them to charter schools outside of the neighborhood, she realized Martez was still strongly influenced by things happening close to home. This spurred her decision to move to College Town. She said she wanted "a slower pace of life" for her children. Even after she moved, Melody had strong opinions about the schools in College Town and a strong preference for Lighthouse over the school located just a block from her new home because of how she perceived the people in her new neighborhood.

And again, when I talked about being from your environment and a better setting, Lighthouse is away from where I live at because their neighborhood school is Washington and that's the neighborhood school for "I'm on the side of the lower class or the bad area or the stereotyping of what side of town you're on." Instantly it's like, even when I go to the park, I don't want that for them. I just left this. I see it. So it's like people saying, "Why don't you just put them there, you're at the corner of the school." It's because I want better. If I wanted this I would have stayed where I was. So I do, they do, go out of their way to go to Lighthouse and that's because I want them to be in better education, better environment, better teachers, better staff, better principal.

Melody felt the environment of her neighborhood school, Washington, was for "the side of the lower class" and she perceived Lighthouse was different. She believed her children would receive a better education from better teachers and staff in a better environment at Lighthouse, a predominately white, middle-class school setting.

Melody's belief is consistent with the community discourse surrounding the public schools in College Town. Years of discussion over redistricting in order to have more "balanced" schools in College Town were shelved due to public dissent

over preserving neighborhood schools, safety and property values. In some of the more heated debates, the words "changing demographics" of the community referred to families moving from the inner city, as if they were one body, deeming them "Others." The debates suggested that many established residents were uncomfortable with their children attending the schools at the bottom of the list of test score rankings for the College Town school district because they feared the achievement potential of their children would be in jeopardy. In public forums on the topic some residents went as far as to say that going to a particular school would risk the moral character of their children.

Washington, Melody's neighborhood school and another nearby school were projected in the community political discourse as the least desirable elementary schools because of their ranking on state tests and the large percentage of students from low-income households. Though not as likely to come up in official conversations surrounding school policy, the larger discourse of the community suggested that the ethnic composition of the schools also concerned parents and community members as they negotiated school boundaries and funding. These two schools also happened to be the schools located closest to the shelter and in neighborhoods with the most affordable housing, serving a large majority of the elementary school students who received free and reduced lunch due to the household incomes of their families and a large majority of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. I spent several years of my career as a teacher in one of these schools and can attest to the hardworking and dedicated staff who facilitated meaningful learning experiences and made strong connections with children and families whose class and cultural backgrounds often differed from their own. This portrayal of a strong and caring school community is not represented in the public media, which is largely focused on the school's test scores, which remain the lowest for the district.

When I mentioned the name of this school to Julien, Sandy's daughter, she responded, "That's a bad school." I didn't ask Julien how she had come to this conclusion but her comment may reflect the dominant community discourse influenced by the effects of economic segregation: a small number of elementary schools serving a large majority of students of color from low-income households. Even for the people who were purportedly what made these schools unfit for many of the established families in the community, the schools at the bottom of the list were not considered to be good schools by the parents in the study either. This was most notably observed in examples of where parents searched for housing, why they turned down lower rents in some neighborhoods in order to keep the children out of particular schools, and in Melody's case, why her children walked long distances to remain at Lighthouse school after transitioning from the shelter. The families in the study had adopted the discourse of the community and separated themselves from the identities this deficit perspective suggested about them and their children.

Parents as Advocates: In and Out of School

All of the parents in the study were concerned for the education of their children. Three of the four families mentioned struggles their children had in school and how Lighthouse school was better for their kids. Only one of the parents thought the school experience at Lighthouse was not challenging enough for her kids. Kendra drew on the strictness and regular testing regimen of her children's previous school as a mark of excellence even though her oldest daughter's reading achievement scores placed her two years behind in her former Chicago public school. Kendra felt the new school did not assign enough homework and there was too much play and not enough work. Her kids loved school and she attributed that to school being too easy or fun, unlike what they had experienced in their inner city

school. Perhaps her oldest daughter's struggle with reading in school drove her suspicion of whether her kids were learning enough. She was very aware of the importance of school achievement and despite her daughter's struggles in school she expected Mariah to succeed. She compared Mariah to her younger sister in this story of school success:

> I know my oldest daughter, she is so much like my little sister. And my little sister, she is now twenty...she'll be twenty one...and she has dyslexia. But she goes to Jackson State...smart as ever. She has a learning disability but she is so adamant about getting it right that I think she taught herself out of this dyslexia. She's smart...smart as ever. And sometimes I think she kind of got it with her reading but she's so adamant about making... (interrupted by Mariah at the window) "girl, get out! (laughing)." So she's very persistent on getting it. If it something she want to get, she's going to get it. Because this..."ok, Mommy, I can't get this. Mommy, I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to do that." She has time to really sit there and really focus on her homework.

Kendra recognized her role in making sure that learning happened outside of school, not just in school. All of the parents in the study shared stories of themselves as teachers for their children and providing resources for them to learn. Shana repeatedly referred to the responsibility of the home to value education and instill a desire to learn in children. In this story, Shana recalls how strict her own parents were on education and schooling:

> My mom and my dad was very strict on education and going to school and stuff. When I was a kid, we used to have the little desks at home...and my dad...if you didn't get something right, my dad didn't believe in "I can't" and "I don't know." Those two words he didn't like. Any time that we got something wrong and he tell you to spell it or read it and you say "I can't" he would have a ruler and he would make us stick our hands out and he would whoop us on our hands. So as I grew up, you know, as I got older and everything, I was good at spelling and everything. When I was in high school I was on National Honors for Scholars. I had straight A's. I majored in computers. About the time I had graduated out of high school, I was doing pre-calculus. You know, it just depends on what your parents instill at home, whether you going take it and use it as you get older, but a lot of parents they don't take the time with their kids either. They figure they are learning enough at school when they're really not because most kids need 1-on-1.

I assumed her father's approach would be a negative memory for her, but Shana

insisted it was actually positive now because it helped her to succeed in school:

> It wasn't positive then, but it's positive now because I understand now why
> he did that because if a parent don't push a child they're not going to do more
> than what you ask them to do. So I felt...I'm glad that he...his...everybody
> learn with techniques that are different...and a lot of people don't agree with
> certain and teach their kids within the home, but at the time I didn't
> understand why.

Unlike her father's approach, Shana focused more on being a role model for her

daughters as a reader. She believed this is why they liked to read and why they

valued reading in their lives:

> Me and my children, no matter where we live at, we always make it our
> business to go to the nearest library and get us a library card and we always
> check out books. Sometimes my kids and I have contests to see who can read
> the most books in a month, you know and stuff like that to make it more fun
> because reading don't have to be boring, but also reading strengthens your
> mind, your vocabulary and everything because me myself, if I hear someone
> say a word and I don't know the meaning of it, it's going to bother me until I
> go and get a dictionary and look that meaning up and remember it and that's
> why I always try to teach my kids too. Now my kids like to read. Now kids
> that don't like to read, you would know it because when my kids are reading,
> they bother them while they are reading because they don't want them
> reading, they want them playing with them. And a lot of kids don't like to
> read because like I said, their parents don't instill it in them at home. But I've
> always read so that's why my kids like to read.

Additionally, three parents mentioned materials or tutoring that they bought

to help their children learn. Melody and Julissa purchased a v-tech to help their

children develop early reading skills, a hand-held electronic learning toy advertised

as a device that will put your child "ahead of the curve." Shana's early attempts to

support her daughter's reading development included purchasing Hooked on

Phonics per the recommendation of her daughter's teacher and enrolling her in

Sylvan Learning Center for extra tutoring outside of school.

Parent Perspectives on Reading and their Children as Readers

Although parents advocated for their children in ways that were consistent with their goals to raise their children's achievement in school, they also understood the importance of being passionate about learning and exploring new ideas. Beliefs about what makes someone a good reader illustrated what families valued for their children and how this was influenced by their own literacy histories. When I asked Julissa how she would describe someone who's a good reader she replied:

> J: How would I describe someone who's a good reader?
> M: There's not a right answer to this.
> J: No! That's what I'm thinking. I don't really know. Except a person that reads. It's good about reading because you can...the only thing I know about reading is...it's good reading because you can find out about stuff like something you never knew about like my mom, she never read books to us but she read the Bible to us. And it was like stories...and there's some stories in there that are really like interesting. I still remember. So it's good reading to your kids plus you still remember after all these days. I like books with like animals, what they about...
> M: Information books.
> J: Yes. And like yesterday I took them to the museum.
> M: You did. The Natural History Museum?
> J: Yes, in College Town.
> M: Did they like it?
> J: I was so stuck reading it that I forget to read it to them because I was so into it. And one by one. It's interesting!
> M: Did you go to see the birds and mammals?
> J: All of them.
> M: It's a really good spot.
> J: And the names are different.
> M: The scientific names?
> J: Yes.
> M: What was their favorite?
> J: They really like the lions and the link cat? And my Darius, he was interested in the bones.
> M: The whale skeleton...was there like a big-
> J: -The human bones. He was like, that's how we look on the inside? The monkeys kind of look like humans so he was like, they look like humans, mama.

Julissa's own interest in reading the museum exhibits portrays what she values about reading. Going beyond her desire for her children to have access to good jobs by learning to read and write in both Spanish and English, she understood

that a "good reader" is interested in what they read, which compels them to do more reading. She experienced this herself at the museum when she forgot to read aloud to her children from the exhibits because she was so interested in what she was reading to herself. Julissa's response to my question about what makes a good reader challenges the idea of functional literacy or a "back to the basics" approach often reserved for students from underrepresented groups due to deficit perspectives on what they can achieve in school and what is valued as knowledge in school (Finn, 1999).   For many students who are turned off to reading early in their education, perhaps experiences that allowed them to experience an aesthetic response to reading as Julissa did at the museum are all too uncommon (Rosenblatt, 1978).

William, Julissa's partner, suggested the importance of imagination in reading. When I asked him what makes a good reader, he noted readers who could bring the story alive like they were actors in the book, a movie for the listeners:

> W: I said they got a good imagination like I said before and if they can um...like how they explain or act with the book when they reading to you...because I used to have teachers that could read the book to you would be all in it...like how they acting with it. To me that's how you're a good reader if you can do it like that. Because some people just read the book and it's just all duh...and I think I could do that! I should just read to myself! They can't have fun with it and some people can read a book and you like, what? It's a movie or something.

William said he and his sons, Lawrence and Darius often read together this way, sometimes dreaming about the stories they read. William described his renewed interest reading the children's books at the shelter, just like his kids. He said he was excited to read books that he wanted to read as a child but never had the chance to. William's explanation of what a good reader is reminds me of the importance of imagination in learning. Unfortunately, the current educational climate does little to encourage the imaginative reading that William demonstrates for his children in the

privacy of their family room at the shelter. It is more likely that the role of imagination *and* cognition in reading is undermined by the score-obsessed, skill-based approaches to teaching reading prevalent in elementary classrooms today (Meyer & Whitmore, 2011).

Inspired by Teachers

Each of the parents in the study, at some point in their elementary or secondary schooling, experienced a teacher who showed them a caring disposition. The data show that each of the parents was inspired by a particular teacher, which influenced them to see the purpose of what they were learning more clearly or allowed them to see themselves as valued members of a school community for the first time.

When William talked about his early years of school, he recalled some fond memories of a music teacher who took particular interest in him as a student and who first showed him how to read music, something he loved:

> M: So you said you wrote music? Did you write lyrics and the actual music?
> F: Yeah, I wrote the lyrics. I wrote songs for people. I still do it from time to time (rising intonation). My other little brother, he still be into it. And sometimes he need help with it, but I made beats with them, I do all of that.
> M: Do you play instruments?
> F: The only thing I probably play is the drum. I play the saxophone before too but I ain't too good at it. And the violin, but I ain't too good at that either, but I can play some notes. And the keyboard and probably a piano. Now I know how to play that...that was from school where I learned to play that. I had a music teacher that teach me how to play it.
> M: Yeah, and you understand the notes?
> F: Yeah, I can read the notes. I remember, I used to wonder how they did that. My music teacher taught me that. He taught me how to read it. I was like, ah, that easy! But I always thought they just play the music, not read it!
> M: So did you...would you say your music teachers were the most influential when you were in school?
> F: Mhm. His name was Mr. Smith and he was um...because I used to always mess with the piano and I was like "how do they play this?" And he told me ...like I used to get into trouble sometimes in the classroom but not bad because I used to act crazy sometimes so they had to sit me out and he said "every time they do that come up here and I'll show you a little bit" and I

used to do it. Sometimes I used to do it on purpose because we wasn't doing nothing up in there.

M: It didn't mean too much to you anyway.

F: Yeah, so I started messing with it. And he gave me a keyboard one time. He gave me like this small keyboard and he was like "you can practice with it" and he gave me music, notes and all that and that's how I got more into it.

M: Yeah, where did you keep that?

F: I used to put it in my backpack all the time. And I used to leave it over at friends' house like I want to leave this over there. And I lost it too. Like one time I left it over at my uncle's girlfriend's crib and when I went back, they moved. So I ain't never seen it no more and that's all I wanted...because I heard that they was moving, but I couldn't get there fast enough. And I didn't think they was gonna move that fast. They moved fast.

M: Yeah. How did you feel when you lost that?

F: I feel sad because I even looked for it. They threw a lot of stuff away in the garbage and so I went digging up in the dumpster to see if I could at least find it. But I didn't ever get to find it.

Mr. Smith recognized William's early love of music and instruments. He showed him that the notes could be read, gave him access to the sheet music and keyboard he needed to play and showed concern for him and a caring disposition that allowed William to see himself as valued in school, something he didn't usually experience in the classroom.

Julissa, William's partner, told a similar story of a teacher who spent time beyond the school day teaching and supporting her as she adjusted to the new system of U.S. schooling and the English language after moving from her native Puerto Rico.

J: -Her name was Miss Piazza and she knew a little bit of Spanish and um she was really nice to me. She teach me a lot and she used to let me stay in her class to tell me how this was right...the math...explain it to me because I don't understand a lot.

M: So she would keep you after by yourself?

J: Yes and teach me math and English...and she would help me out a lot.

The extra time Miss Piazza devoted to Julissa contributed to her growing confidence with the English language and made her work in school more meaningful.

Similarly, Shana recalled a high school English teacher who made writing meaningful by inviting the students to write about topics that connected to their lives outside of school, something she said she was rarely given the opportunity to do:

> I love to write. But in school I used to get kind of discouraged and didn't want to do the writing assignment when they would have me...like they would pick a writing assignment to talk about something that I didn't know nothing about. I liked this one teacher that I had. She would have everybody write a topic on a piece of paper and crumple it up and put it in a bag. And whatever topic that she pulled out, that's what we would write about. But every topic that was in the bag, every one of us had been through it at some point...at some point in time in our lives. Whether it was with babies or something with growing up or something like that. And it's easier for you to be passionate about what you are writing if it is something that pertains to you or society rather than something that you don't know anything about.

Connecting learning in school with the lived realities of students outside of school is heavily supported in educational research (Christensen, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2007; Mahiri, 1998; Meyer, 2010; Smith & Whitmore, 2005). As Shana recalled in this story, the teacher who inspired her to write most in school asked her about her life outside of school which pertained to the challenges of her neighborhood, her community. For students from underrepresented backgrounds, this continues to be a rare opportunity in school. Yet, Kendra was invited to take up the identity of a good writer in a high school English class because she had a teacher who noticed her storytelling abilities:

> K: Well, reading and writing...I was a very good reader...always been...and a very good writer. Um, I had people come up to me...especially in high school...my freshman year...uh...journalism club...they wanted me to be in journalism club but I didn't want to be in there because they was gonna take my Saturdays and I wasn't really doing anything, but I didn't want to be in school on a Saturday so I didn't want to do journalism club. But they wanted me to be in journalism club, they wanted me to be on the yearbook committee, the newspaper committee, because of my writing. Because I could make up a story quick...because we had read...ah, I forgot the name of that story...we had read a story in English class about the different levels of hell and we had to write a story about it
> M: Dante's Inferno?

> K: That's exactly what it was! That's exactly what it was and we had to write a story...our own story about it. And my teacher was like amazed with it and she (laughing) passed it out to everybody, like the school and she put it on the wall and my thing was on the wall and I was thinking, what is going on? And that's when everyone started coming to me, "I want you to be in here, I want you to be in there" and I was like "No thank you." But that's when I found out that I had writing skills.

Kendra's experience taught her that she could write, a powerful discovery and disposition to acquire in school. The teacher's public acknowledgment of her writing strengths transformed the way she perceived herself as a writer.

I interviewed Sandy late in the study so I asked her specifically if there had been a teacher that stood out to her as a student since many of the other parents mentioned teachers in their interviews. Though she could not recall the teacher's name she described her seventh grade teacher as someone who cared about her success in school:

> S: I don't remember her name, but she used to always make sure that she contact my grandma and make sure that my homework was done. She used to always call on me to come up to the board because she said my handwriting was pretty. And uh, and just you know, tell me to keep doing a good job because I always had good grades.

The data show that the parents in the study understood the role of teachers in their children's education because they had experienced caring teachers and the difference this made for them. They had expectations for teachers to be caring and to also have high expectations for their children to learn. Parents shared stories that suggested they were teachers in the lives of their children, questioned teacher assumptions or behavior, and countered prevailing myths about parents from underrepresented groups as people who do not value education.

Parents as Teachers: Expectations and Advocacy

All parents in the study saw themselves as teachers in the lives of their

children. While they deferred to official school records to define the achievement of

their children, they exercised agency in their beliefs that their children could learn

and would learn at school and outside of school despite whatever struggles might

exist.

Parents also questioned the school's approach, through a resistance

narrative, especially if they were concerned for their children's progress, as Kendra

did here, referring to Mariah's homework load from school:

> Now I don't think they are challenging her enough because she hardly bring
> home any homework. I need to see more homework.
> M: Ok. Tell me why.
> K: Because at school...I hope she's learning in school, but I want to see if she
> is learning by bringing her homework home. So I can do this and I can do
> this. Ah, ok. I can see you're learning. That's why I need homework. Yeah, I
> need more homework. She's too big to be coming home with no homework.
> So at parent teacher conferences I'm going to ask about that.

This example illustrates Kendra's desire to see for herself that her daughters were

learning in school, a concern often attributed to professional and middle class

parents, not families from underrepresented groups (Flores et al., 1991). Melody

shared Kendra's concerns about homework and felt the charter school her children

attended challenged her kids more:

> Here, I think they give them too much slack. They get away with a lot. They
> do. Because when I come home from college and I know my cousin that's in
> high school they talk about homework but when mine come home I say,
> "Where's homework?" "Well, I did it" or "I didn't have it" and for a long time,
> they didn't have it and not because they just didn't have it, it's because they
> just wasn't getting it. And I'm used to where now like the little guys have a
> Friday folder or a Monday folder, you have something weekly for every day.
> And they always ask me, "Why you always have so much homework?"
> (pause). "Why you don't have homework?!" (laughter). So I think they get
> away with a lot here. Like we were talking about the recess thing. When
> they first did it in Illinois we also, "Oh my God, they took the kids' recess
> away." I think they were talking about trying to take the kids' naps away at

one point, but the recess they did. And at first we was talking about it was so hard and basically they were setting up the system like it was all schooling. Even their school would start at 7:45 in the morning and then they would get out at 3:30. And then that's not even including the after care and before care. So it's different here from there with how long of a process with teaching and drilling them, as they see it.

Melody expressed that initially she was concerned about cutting recess for the kids in their charter school, but she also saw the lack of homework coming from Lighthouse as a sign that the kids were not being challenged as much. She had come to see school from a charter perspective, one she characterized a teaching and drilling approach with fewer recesses and a longer school day. She largely credited her oldest son's charter school education for his college scholarship and was hopeful that her younger children would have the same opportunity. Melody understood that this would require them to do well in school and that they would need to be able to do challenging work. She did not feel they were being pushed enough at Lighthouse. Melody thought more homework was necessary for her children to excel academically. She cited the letter grades given at the charter school as a guide for her to work on what was difficult for her children at home, whereas at Lighthouse, she only received general descriptors of their progress. She felt the charter school reports that came out before their official grades allowed her teach her children at home, contribute to their progress in school, and hold them accountable for why they might not be receiving A's and B's:

> In reality they're not, this is the other thing, they don't give them letter grades here. Out there, they do. Because when you sit down and you talk to the teacher, they give them this progress report, I understand that, they get that. But then they also get the letter grades which you can actually sit down with them and say "Why did you get this F? Why did you get this C? What didn't you understand?" Where you're looking at the progress report and that's what I think they're used to because if I get a progress report, then I have an opportunity to work on it because you usually get that before you get the grades and uh, that's another thing that's different from there.

Knowing their children were learning in school and supporting them with learning outside of school is a responsibility the parents in this study took seriously. They didn't depend solely on the teacher's judgment of their child's needs or progress as expressed in their attitudes about homework or in their views on what their children could learn at home. In some instances, as in the example of Melody and Kendra's views on homework, parents worked to respect the views of the school but challenged the school's or teacher's approach when their perspective differed. At other times, parents expressed doubt about their child's progress as they deferred to the perspectives of the school.

Sandy thought early on that her daughter, Julien, had difficulties with learning. Born prematurely, doctors told her that Julien would learn slower than other children:

> S: Well, when she was born the doctors had told me that she was going to learn slower than the normal kids. Her learning disability was going to be a little slower. And then I could tell from her work and stuff. The teachers always say "Well, she don't need to be tested" but I think she do. And they won't test her.

Sandy noticed that Julien struggled with math when she did school work at home. She said Julien learned differently from her other children. When she tried to talk with Julien's first grade teacher about her concerns, Sandy said the teacher suggested Julien was doing fine in class. Sandy's story projects her identity as a mother who values the education of her children and who has high expectations for her children to learn:

> S: She used to always say there's nothing wrong with her. She just needs to be taught better. Need to have a one on one with you. And no, I didn't think that because she was...she always got help at home (rising intonation) and I used to always ask them how was she doing in class because when she come home she always say, "well the teacher don't teach us this and I knew how to do it in school." And they would always say, "well, she's doing good here at the school" but it would be totally different at home. So that was the issue it

was like, "Are you all sure she is doing good in the class because when she home it was something else." And it was always like, "She don't need this, she don't need that."

M: So what do you think that was all about?

S: I was thinking maybe because she was lazy when she get home. Because I wouldn't give her any of the answers. We could sit up all night and you going to learn how to do this. Now Brianna will…because Brianna will always say "Ooh, let me do it. I know how to do it." And she was sneaky, trying to give her answers. And Julien, she didn't want to do it. She just wanted somebody to give her the answers. So I think…her and being in class, I think that's what she was getting, the answers from her friends instead of her doing it on her own.

M: And so you don't think the teacher really knew what she could do as a student?

L: Mhm. Yeah, I think she was getting the answers because they used to always say, "She does well here" (rising intonation). No.

Sandy refused to accept that Julien was doing well in school because of her difficulties with homework. She wasn't satisfied knowing that the teacher thought Julien was doing well, but instead challenged the teacher's assumptions about her daughter's progress. Though she did not go so far as to suggest the teacher had low expectations for Julien, Sandy did not trust that Julien was learning in school because she had observed her learning closely at home.   Despite the seemingly irresistible good news of a child doing well in school, Sandy resisted the teacher's report, as she knew it was not enough to insure that Julien was learning in school.

Shana questioned some of the ways the school defined her daughter Rhoda's difficulty with reading and how she learned best. She was willing to cooperate, plan and support what was happening at school, but she also strongly believed that there was more than one way to learn how to read and some ways worked better than others for any particular person. When Shana purchased Hooked on Phonics for Rhoda, she came to the conclusion that the reading program wasn't for everyone when it didn't help. Shana also knew her daughters well as readers. Not only could she describe early reading behaviors for her daughter who was struggling, she could talk about what her daughters liked to read and what interested them. In this story, Shana describes Rhoda's early struggles with reading:

> Now Rhoda was the type of kid that she would make you think that she knew how to read and she would make you think that she knew how to read and that she knew how to write because you would read a story to her and you would tell her to read the story back to you out of the same book but she wasn't actually reading the story, she memorized it. So she didn't know any of the words or anything. She memorized the story so when she used to have homework, she used to ask me, "Mom, how do you spell 'and', how do you spell 'but'" and this that and the other and I tell her to point it out to me in the book and she couldn't point it out to me. If she reading it in the sentence, she remembers it's in the sentence because that's what you read to her, but when it came time for her to show you what she actually knew, she couldn't.

Shana's observations of Rhoda as a young reader illustrate her attention to her daughter's developing understanding of the reading process. When I asked her what makes Rhoda a good reader now, she had this to say:

> What makes Rhoda a good reader? Anybody who...knows how to read but still understand that you don't know every word. Because there's new words every day...I don't know every word. So if you ask for help...if you ask someone you know "what does this mean? how do you pronounce this?" And you know sometimes I'm wrong...I still sound my words out if I don't know how to pronounce it. I think that makes a good reader because you're studying trying to better yourself, your studying to try to excel. You're not at the point where you say "I know enough words so I don't need to learn nothing new." If you ever get to that point then you going to lower your standards and everything because there's a lot of words that you're not going to be able to...there's a lot of words out here that's more professional and then you have the Ebonics of words, then you have the words in between. You need to know all those words because a majority of them mean the same thing it's just you say them a different way. So I think if you constantly asking for help and you constantly got your mind hungry to learn new words and everything, I think that makes a good reader. And taking the time out to read, of course, because a lot of people don't.

Shana's idea of what makes Rhoda a good reader connects to her goal and advice for her children of "trying to better yourself." When she encourages her daughters to keep their minds hungry for new words so that they can be flexible in the world with different ways of saying things, this belief can shape how they might acquire the academic language of economic and political power while valuing the language of their family and the communities to which they belong. This is a

as long as you comprehend. It might take you longer, but you know what you just read.

Kendra questioned the school assessment of Mariah's reading because she felt too much emphasis was placed on how slow Mariah read, even though she understood what she read.   The confidence Kendra asserted in talking about Mariah as a reader reveals her willingness to entertain an alternative explanation for Mariah's reading achievement scores. Her resistance narrative of her daughter as a reader places deficits within the school's approach rather than deficits inherent in her daughter's ability to read. This keen observation of Mariah's strengths as a reader reveals Kendra's willingness to challenge deficits defined by the official texts of school.

The flood of emphasis placed upon fluency as reading rate in the last decade, stems from the findings presented by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the National Reading Panel report (2000) which privileges a linear approach to literacy in beginning reading instruction and the measurable outcomes it affords. Though some researchers have developed definitions of fluency that promote a more nuanced relationship with comprehension (Rasinski, 2010), the prevalence of assessments that measure rate as a predictor of reading progress as early as kindergarten suggest that these broader definitions of fluency and its complex relationship to comprehension are largely ignored, jeopardizing a complex theory of reading (Goodman, 2006). Instead, Kendra's assessment of Mariah's reading is more consistent with a theory of reading as a meaning based transaction with text in which the reader brings to bear her own life experiences, questions and knowledge to the text, searching for meaning in the act of engaging with print (Rosenblatt, 1978). Observations such as the one Kendra made here about Mariah are critical to how Mariah will view herself as a reader despite the challenges she faces in school. Her mother's insight into Mariah's reading process

will provide a buffer, though potentially not great enough to combat failure on reading measures in school, but one that may give Mariah a sense of herself as a good reader outside of school.

A Lineage of Advocacy

The data also show that some of the parents experienced periods of struggle in school where parents or grandparents advocated on their behalf. Sandy attributed overcoming trouble in school to her grandmother's advocacy, though long distance over the phone:

> L: -Now when I was younger in school, I wouldn't talk because my mother, we had moved to Milwaukee. And you know my mother is deaf so she not talking so I wouldn't talk so they thought something was wrong with me. I wouldn't say nothing, just do my work. I wouldn't say nothing.
> M: So did you know they wanted you to talk?
> L: Mhm.
> M: So what was going through your head?
> L: I don't know. I just wouldn't say nothing. They used to take me...put me in like special classes because they thought something was wrong with me but it wasn't. I just didn't talk.
> M: And did you know you were in a special class when they put you in there?
> L: Mhm.
> M: And it...I mean can you remember thinking anything?
> L: Nope. And my grandma...and they used to call my grandma, "She won't say anything, she won't talk, we think something wrong with her." And my grandma used to...they used to put me on the phone and she used to cuss me out like "You need to say something!" I wouldn't say nothing.

Sandy said she only really started talking again when they moved back to Chicago, close to her grandmother and aunts. She appreciated that her grandmother pushed her and described her as the savior of the family:

> M: Did you ever get in trouble for not talking?
> L: My grandma, yeah, she used to get so mad.
> M: Are you grateful that she cussed you out? That she pushed you like that?
> L: Mhm. She still like that now. I mean she don't say anything, but she still like that now like you need to do this and I know your grown but you still need to do this. I listen to her. If it weren't for her, I don't know where we

would be at. All of us, even my sisters. All of us. Because she's like the savior of the family. There is only a handful of us, we're small.

Julissa was influenced by her mother's advocacy when she was in fifth grade and had just arrived in the U.S. from Puerto Rico. Although her mother spoke very little English, she went to the school to advocate on her daughter's behalf so her teacher would understand the differences between Spanish spoken in Mexico and her native Puerto Rico, and help her see that Julissa should not be flunked.

> J: Yes. I came here when I was nine so I was fifth grade.
> M: And how did your life change when you came here?
> J: I didn't know no English. My family didn't know no English. And we had to try to learn English as fast as we could and then...we had a bilingual teacher...they taught us English.
> M: In Puerto Rico?
> J: Here. Yes and they was teaching me little by little. And the only difference is that there is Mexican and Puerto Rican in the United States...they got...they is Spanish but they got different-
> M: -Differences in the ways they use Spanish.
> J: Yes. So they was trying to flunk me because they thought I didn't know what it was but my mom had to go to the school and tell them that we're Puerto Rican...we're different
> M: So you speak differently than the kids that were coming from Mexico?
> J: Yes. Like banana...to them is banana too, but like orange to us is china, to them is naranja. And to us a naranja is the bigger one?
> M: Grapefruit?
> J: Yes, the grapefruit.
> M: So there's differences in the ways they say things. And you said the school wanted to flunk you...they didn't think you were learning. And so you said your mom went in?
> J: Yes. My mom went in to talk to them and said we're Puerto Rican and showed them that we don't say the same things and they tried to understand and they...they went with it and learned-
> M: -about you.
> J: Yes. And then they started...I passed (upward intonation).

This story illustrates the power of advocacy for the parents from one generation to the next. Remarkably, although Julissa's mother spoke very little English, she had the courage to go to Julissa's school and explain variances in Spanish language use. When Julissa told me this story, I was reminded of my husband's story as a third grader when he had just arrived to the U.S. from London

after being raised in Australia, Malaysia and England. His teacher identified him as a struggling student because he referred to vacations as "holidays," pronounced the words "battery" and "aluminum" differently and repeatedly spelled the words "colour" and "favourite" as he had in England. My husband's parents were surprised by the teacher's assessment and informed her of the linguistic differences in the English language. His father, a corporate executive who had lived around the world was well positioned to advocate on my husband's behalf. Julissa's mother did not have this same access to economic and political power so approaching the school for her was a much greater challenge, particularly since she did not speak the language of power. Her mother's advocacy likely influenced Julissa's willingness to question a teacher's perspective on her own child's language learning years later.

Julissa shared that her oldest son, Lawrence, had a teacher in Gary, Indiana who advised her to speak English only with her children. Yet, Julissa's experience growing up in a bilingual family made her question this advice. She talked about her bilingualism as an important skill, resisting the teacher's strong warning of how learning two languages could interfere with Lawrence's progress. The following story illustrates Julissa's willingness to question the teacher's advice based on her own history as a bilingual student:

> J: I was talking to my son's teacher and she said it's harder on their brains because the teacher was saying that um...something about a part in the brain-
> M: -Who told? What? Where?
> J: The teacher named Ms. Smith in Gary. And she said it was hard for them to learn both so I started like teaching them my way...like I showed them something like this is this in Spanish and this in English and then make them repeat it and then hide it and then come back minutes later or an hour later and say what's this and they started learning it.

Julissa's story about teaching her children to learn two languages the way she knew it was possible reveals her identity as a teacher for her children and the value she placed on her children learning the English of their father's family and the

Spanish of her family from Puerto Rico. When I discussed with her that I believed Ms. Smith was mistaken in her concerns, Julissa confidently told me that she knew this because her bilingualism helped her to read and write in both languages. She told me she wanted to start teaching her children to read Spanish when they got their own place. She planned to use post-it notes to label things in the apartment in English and Spanish, not unlike the practice of many early childhood classroom teachers. Jullissa said she'd seen many job postings online that paid more if the applicant was bilingual. She saw an important link between her children's potential to be bilingual and their future job prospects. Both resistance and assimilation were part of her quest to teach her children Spanish.

I wondered how Lawrence's former teacher could discourage Julissa from teaching her children Spanish. When do we discourage this practice in middle class families? Why is it acceptable for some families to hire private tutors to teach their children a second language, but families from underrepresented backgrounds who can teach their children at home are more likely to be perceived as interfering with the goals of the school? Several weeks after I had been meeting with them for art and story hour, Julissa revealed to me that Lawrence had an existing IEP for speech from his first year of school. I am not qualified to diagnose speech difficulties in children, but I was surprised to hear that Lawrence needed this support. It seemed to me that nearly 14 years of teaching experience in the elementary school would have alerted me to possible challenges after interacting with Lawrence on several occasions. I couldn't help but wonder if deficit perspectives regarding Julissa's native Spanish and William's African American Vernacular English had influenced the perceived need for a speech intervention so early in Lawrence's public education.

Melody expressed doubt about her youngest son's speech during an interview with me. Dylen had come into the study room at the public library where

we were talking. Melody turned toward him, placed her hands on his waist and

asked him why he had left the children's room without his older siblings and if he

was finished playing on the computer. His response triggered the following

exchange between mother and son. In this moment, I watched Melody help Dylen

enunciate the sounds in words more clearly, much like a teacher in a primary

classroom might:

> M: Did you finish on the computer?
> D: There's something wrong with the copmuter?
> Melody: Com-puter. Com-puter.
> Meg: There's something wrong with it?
> Melody: I need to look into his speech.
> Meg: You have to what?
> Melody: His speech. They kept saying in pre-K that it
> should get better.
> Meg: You're worried about it?
> Melody: Yes, because certain letters he can't pronounce
> it right. I don't know what it is, but it's having an effect
> on putting letters to make a word, even with his
> alphabet, when he says his alphabet, even certain letters
> he says different. So when you try...for a long
> time...what is it? Like, now we've been working on BAT.
> D: BAT.
> Melody: And he wasn't saying the T. He was saying BA.
> D: B (letter name)-A (letter name)-C?
> Meg: You're close!
> Melody: Not C.
> Meg: Say it again. Say it slowly.
> D: T?
> Meg: Good! You're just learning, aren't you?
> Melody. Mhm. Say BAT.
> D: BAT.
> Melody: If you say the T (made the T sound), you can,
> you know it's a what?
> D: BAT.
> Melody: No, the letter.
> D: B (pause) A
> Melody: The last one.
> D: T.
> Melody: T. Yeah.

Melody had become concerned with Dylen's speech after teachers in his pre-

K program had suggested that his speech should improve.   Again, I hadn't noticed

that Dylen was particularly difficult to understand in my interactions with him. I viewed his approximations of the sounds in words as part of the developmental process of language learning. I thought Dylen expressed himself easily and for the most part, could be understood without a great deal of effort from the listener. I wondered if the suggestion that there was something wrong with Dylen's speech had initially surprised Melody or if she really believed it was a problem when his pre-K teachers brought it up in conversation. Like Lawrence, William and Julissa's oldest son, I wondered if Dylen's cultural and linguistic background influenced the perspectives of the teachers who had decided that he had a speech problem so early in his schooling because they did not understand the strength of the language structures he already possessed (Labov, 1972). Although in these examples parents did not always challenge the school perspective, the stories illustrate the ways parents were willing to collaborate and take seriously advice from teachers, while also assuming responsibility for guiding their children's development outside of school and considering whether they needed to do more to confront potential problems with learning in school.

<u>Conclusion: The Tension Between Assimilation and Resistance</u>

The parents in the study narrated stories that suggested a tension between their desires to assimilate as they resisted deficits associated with their former neighborhoods, their ethnicity, race and class backgrounds, and their homelessness. This tension supported their quest narrative as it both voiced their expectations for a better life through better schools, safer communities and better opportunities and resisted returning to a life that would not provide these options. Additionally, parental expectations for children to learn in and out of school remained high despite feedback from schools that suggested deficits in their children. In some cases, parents resisted explanations for school failure or success, recognizing their

role in making sure their children were learning.   Whether it was assisting with homework, making big circles with very young children as they gained control over writing tools, taking children to the library, trying to get access to tools and materials that would support their children's learning in school such as tutoring and commercial programs designed to increase literacy, the parents in this study supported their children in ways consistent with what our society believes contributes to academic success. The parents were not afraid to offer opinions about why their children struggled in school and could readily talk about their strengths and interests outside of school.

For these parents, advocacy was part of their role in their children's education. Examples of collaborating with a teacher to raise reading achievement, questioning advice from school regarding achievement and learning at home, going to the school to see why a child didn't like it, to request more homework, and to inquire about low grades, are forms of parental advocacy the parents in this study engaged in. Yet, many of the parents' and children's schooling histories included periods of struggle, threats of being flunked or not advancing to the next grade, referrals to special education, and dropping out. Despite these struggles, parents saw the education of their children as key to their success and continued to believe in their potential to become whatever they wanted to be, whatever it was that they were passionate about. They viewed their children as people who could grow up to be anything they wanted to be, resisting the idea that their children's educational future would not change or could not be different from their own. The positive outlook of parents on their children's futures was shaped by their beliefs in what a life in College Town could provide for their families as compared to their former communities.

The parents resisted and contested identities surrounding deficit perspectives of people of color from the inner city, while simultaneously taking up

deficit talk to describe people from their former neighborhoods, or people they met in College Town from similar ethnic and class backgrounds. I don't know if this had to do with my position as a white middle class female from a university setting or if the parents truly believed in the deficit perspectives they shared. Alexander (2010) posits that the media's barrage of lectures on morality by Bill Cosby to Black audiences suggests a deficit assumption about families from the inner city: that they don't understand that men should be good fathers. Alexander argues that although incarceration and the control of the justice system have been normalized in "ghetto" communities, that doesn't mean that imprisonment is perceived as acceptable and that people of color living in the inner city do not value the young men in their communities:

> Poor people of color, like other Americans-indeed like nearly everyone around the world-want safe streets, peaceful communities, healthy families, good jobs, and meaningful opportunities to contribute in society. The notion that ghetto families do not, in fact, want those things, and instead are perfectly content to live in crime-ridden communities, feeling no shame or regret about the fate of their young men is, quite simply, racist. It is impossible to imagine that we would believe such a thing about whites (p. 170).

For William, a young Black man from the inner city, jail was the last place he wanted to see his sons. He prayed his children would not have to grow up in Gary, Indiana and that they would never have to return. He wanted them to experience all the possibilities he saw for them in College Town and to avoid the crime they witnessed daily in Gary. Melody described her son Martez as a follower and was afraid he would "fall to the streets" now that he was almost a teenager. She wanted Martez to understand honest ways to make money like mowing lawns, something she said he did not see from many of the young men in their inner city neighborhood. Sandy didn't want her son to play outside when he was little because she wanted to shield him from the gang-banging and drugs in the streets. Now that

he was grown, she said her son knew better, but she protected him from making the decisions she made as a youth on the streets by sending him to live with his father in a small city in another state when she became homeless in Chicago. She was determined to raise her nephew, a promise she made to her brother who was in federal prison for selling drugs, something she said he did to pay the bills after losing his job. Sandy was concerned her nephew was struggling in school and wouldn't have enough support from his mother to keep him off the streets. For William, Melody and Sandy, their inner city neighborhoods did not offer their children enough possibilities and in some ways, severely limited what they could imagine for themselves as a future.

The counterportraits talk back to the official portrait of homelessness but also to the official portrait of inner city families. The shelter gave the families in the study an opportunity to change the course of their lives, to leave dangerous neighborhoods, to expose their children to better schools and safer streets, and to imagine new possibilities. Yet the competing Discourses of homelessness and good parenting made the identity work parents engaged in more complicated because it involved resisting the deficit perspectives associated with their former communities and homelessness, while making attempts to "get yourself together," assimilating into the dominant cultural norms in College Town. For many of the parents, coming to the shelter was the only way they could afford to leave their former communities. The data illustrate that the parents' decisions to leave their families and move to a shelter in another state, surrendering a good deal of their family's privacy and freedom, was stressful. The data show that the conditions under which many of the parents in the study were raising their children in the inner city propelled them to seek out the support of a shelter in a new community. Once in College Town, the identities associated with their former communities and homelessness became ones they were prepared to resist through their stories and their actions as they searched

for ways to improve their lives for their children and to define themselves as

parents in their new community.

CHAPTER VI

"GET IT AND GO": PLANNING AND ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

"If any family in this country struggles, then we cannot be fully content with our own family's good fortune." – Michelle Obama (March 16, 2012)

The parents in the study engaged in identity work that projected their determination to improve their lives and the lives of their children through the stories they told. Shana and Melody claimed their identities as single mothers as a move toward self-respect and a better life when the fathers of their children did not contribute to or disrupted these goals. Sandy reminded me that she had always been a single parent and that returning to Chicago would be easy, that she had done it before. Melody remembered the lessons her mother taught her about raising children and how these lessons made her determined to do better for her children:

> So I ended up becoming a teen mom, getting pregnant at 16, so it's in the midst of this new school I love, I'm learning this, different environment. Different students I met, their parents was like CEOs and stuff like that. So, even though I got pregnant, one thing about my mother, even though I got pregnant, it hurt her, it hurt her so bad. And I didn't even know how to tell her about it. She told me, they were trying to put me in what they call the, there's a name for it, but they place girls that are pregnant in a school and then you go to school with all these pregnant girls and then once you have your baby, you have a daycare there and then you can...she told them "No. If it's not in the rule books that she have to leave for insurance purposes..." She was like, "No." So I continued going to school with a big belly and I think I may have been the first one that they allowed to even go there. And it was embarrassing because I was young, but then it was good because it kept me going. And up until I had my son, even when I ended up getting home schooled in between it, she never did end up saying, "ok you're going to the girl's school. I did the home schooling and then, right back to school. So I finished out at that school and that was the best school ever. My first job I actually worked at one of the biggest hospitals downtown. And they even said, you know once you finish school and major in whatever you're majoring in, you get a job. And it introduced me to so many people, different experiences and it's like if I wouldn't of had that, I probably if I was in my neighborhood school, I would have been you know back to back with my teen pregnancies or even dropping out, but because I had the type of mother that pushed me, it helped me with, ok, even though it may have been embarrassing, hold your head up, keep going, keep going. And once I had him, it's like all my little friends was supporting me with the baby. We

worked together with me going to school and then my mom and my aunt and them they supported me with "you go to school, you go to work, you have the baby. Once you finish, you come home and get your child." And that's one thing I respect about them. They didn't give me leeway to go hang out with the girls. So I...even though I was a teenager, I was a teen mother. Even though I was a mother, I was still a child, meaning I still had to abide by the rules of the household. And it helped me with growing up to take care of my oldest. And I think that's why I was so hard on him because my parents and my aunt were so hard on me.

Melody's story of finishing school as a teen mother above suggests the relationship between her own mother's expectations for her and the expectations Melody has for her own children to finish school and continue on to college. Walking into the public library one day, Melody's daughter, Alex turned to me and asked me how old I was when I got married. When I told her 31, she and her older brother, Martez began talking about when they would marry. I heard Melody cautioning them about getting married too young and starting a family too early. She said they should finish school and establish themselves first. This was consistent with her exclamation, "I don't want any grandbabies" when she talked about the importance of being open with your kids and talking to them about sex, something she wasn't able to do with her mother as a teen.

In another conversation Melody spoke of scholarships for her younger children and expectations for them to achieve what her older son had in school. She was worried at times that this wouldn't happen, but attributed her doubts to not pushing them enough in their school and out of school activities like her mother had done for her and like she had done for her oldest son as a teenage mother. Even obstacles like moving to "the hood" after losing their home to a fire and a teenage pregnancy, Melody's mother expected her to graduate from high school and raise her child to do the same.

The schooling, literacy and life histories of the parents in the study guided their expectations for their own children. Overwhelmingly, parents suggested that

their past mistakes or their parents' past mistakes were largely influential on their plans and goals for the future. Kendra admitted that she hadn't done the best job of raising her daughters before coming to the shelter, that part of the motivation for doing so was to reconnect with them and leave the negative environment where the girls had lost their father and where she had experienced difficulty raising them behind. Her goals were clear and centered on her children and she felt going to the shelter had given her that chance:

> It's a learning experience. You know, some people take life for granted until their situation change. Then when your situation change, like me, it causes you...you don't have no choice, life's got it's ends. If you not tired, you've got nothing to do but think. So if you don't, if you sit in here all the day, you don't have nothing to do on the weekends, all you got to do is think. And I'm thinking about what is my next step. What am I going to do? What do you want to do? And then you think about what you did and what you don't want to do. So it's no choice. You got to get yourself together up in here. Well, it take a long time for some people to learn that but hopefully they're learning fast. But, it's common sense. Get it and go.

Shortly before she transitioned from the shelter I asked Kendra what she wanted for herself in the coming months:

> My own place and to be able to provide for my babies. That's all I want. As long as my kids happy, I'm happy. So that's the only thing I need right now. That's the only thing I'm worried about right now. Now, maybe if I get my own place, it will change. There might be something else, but right now I just want my own place and to be able to provide for my family. That's all.

Providing for her family was something she didn't just want for their well-being, she wanted her girls to see her providing for them:

> And we have always lived with somebody and now it's time for me to say "Ok, mommy is paying these bills. That's what mommy is doing for us." So that's another reason why I'm out here too because I need to do it for us. I (with emphasis) need to do it. Not nobody else but me. I (with emphasis) need to do it now.

<u>Planning for Transition from the Shelter</u>

Julissa wrote down her plans for the future, following a process of planning and reflection and sometimes revision if she didn't think her plan was realistic. Here she describes her process as she considers her own mother's advice to not rush things but to think things through while at the shelter:

> J: So he works from 10-6. I want to find something later than that and he watch the kids. I want to get out fast but it's like my mama say, if you rush things it's going to go bad. So I got to try to make it little by little. I got to sit and think, write it because I write everything down.
> M: Do you keep a journal?
> J: Yes. I haven't done it lately because I have been really occupied. Like you can see my book...I got my papers. I write my appointments and what I'm going to do that day because if I don't I'm going to forget and do something different. And I like to do stuff like, write what I'm thinking. So...right now I'm thinking about moving so I try to write down what I can do to make that happen, read it and carefully analyze it and then see if I can do it and if not, I got to write something else that I can follow...instructions (laughs at herself).

Planning was a big part of the daily activities of the parents in the study. For several of the parents, this planning had to happen between their hours of work during the day and taking care of their children in the evenings. Shana was cautious about how much time she would spend at the shelter in the event that something would happen and she would need to return or to avoid taking beds from a family who needed it. Her full time job at a local hotel did not allow her to schedule appointments to meet with potential landlords during the week and she said many of the people who showed apartments weren't available on the weekends. Additionally, if an appointment could be set up on the weekend, she did not have access to public transportation on Sundays, leaving Saturday as her only practical option. The best-laid plans were dependent on several other factors that complicated reaching particular goals within a specific time frame for many of the parents. Shana shares her process of thinking about her plans while in transition here:

S: Yes, so that's time that you have lost for your stay here. Now me, trying to leave…ok, I came Dec. the 27th, me and my kids. My time will be up on March 27th. But I'm not trying to stay here that long because when you come here they tell you, the intake process is you stay here for your whole 90 days and in the event that something happened, something didn't work out with what you found or whatever, you lose your job, you can come back here and stay here for…So if you are smart about it you can calculate how many days you did stay here and if something did happen you can come back here to stay out the rest of your ninety days because it stops once you leave.

M: Your days?

S: Right. So if you stay for 60 days and something happens, you can come back here for 30 more days. And then everything here, they help you with bus cards. They give you the bus tickets until you get a case worker. When you first get here, it takes you a week, or maybe a little over a week to get a case worker. So in the meantime, until you get a caseworker, they have these little bus tickets that you can go to the front desk and ask for so you will be able to ride the bus. I think they give you two tickets at a time. And then once you get a caseworker, then your caseworker for 31 days for you to be able to do what it is you need to do. Like for me, right now, trying to find a place. Your caseworker will help you, take you, help you to find a place or apply for, try to help you get into that place if they can. But, uh-

M: -Is that difficult?

S: Yes, looking for a place is difficult because by College Town being a college state, a lot of places are not renting until the fall and lot of these places around here are renting to college students, not just regular people. So I might end up ending up having to live in Commercial Town (community adjacent to College Town) which is not bad because it's only fifteen minutes away and I still will only have to catch one bus to go to work and all the buses go downtown. But it's just kind of stressful because I'm the type of person that I don't want to be here no longer than I have to because someone else you know they need my bed and stuff more than I do will have a place to come to. I don't want someone to come here with kids and get turned away because there is no space. When I could be out it's kind of hectic because I work and a lot of other people, they work too and so a lot of times when they want to meet with you it's on the weekends and then it would be on a certain time frame, which I work on the weekends. They basically have jobs working M-F and be off on the weekend. And then Sunday, no public transportation is running, but then your caseworkers don't work on the weekend either. So it's kind of-

M: -It's challenging to set up an appointment to talk about…to meet with a landlord or anyone that-

S: -Yeah, and I go on Craig's List from time to time and I look on there and a lot of the people that place stuff on this place typos because I called about this apartment this man had said would be ready March the 1st. But then when I talked to them, they said that was a typo, it wouldn't be ready until April the 1st. And so I was like ok, I was like thank you. I didn't waste any more of his time because I knew I'm looking to move way before April the 1st.

My early perspective on parents and families in transition was that there was more time for them to plan, prepare and think, to "get yourself together" at the shelter. In the example of Shana's process above, there was little time left to plan, prepare and think when she was working full time and returning to the shelter at night to look after her children. At times, paths to achieving goals could lead somewhere and at other times, what little time parents had could be wasted on a typo in a rental advertisement.

<u>Stability and Sustainability: Hopes and Fears Moving Forward</u>

Similar to Shana, Melody told me that her days while in the shelter did not usually allow for leisure activities such as reading a book. When she was at the shelter, her kids were with her at all times, even when she went to the bathroom. This was shelter policy in order to protect children. Although she said she liked to read for enjoyment, she said she only read one book while in the shelter, a book another mother had given her. Melody's days were packed, not because of work at first, but because she had to take her four year old son, Dylen with her everywhere, from the public library, to centers to apply for daycare, for housing assistance, to look for employment to the free lunch program downtown and back to the shelter to meet her older children after school:

> It was just a daily, zig-zagging thing and a lot of times I would be tired, because that bedtime at nine o'clock, lights out. As soon as we laid in the bed, we're out. We're out for the count. And it was exhausting and it was hard but if I didn't do that then I had nothing to do, meaning you couldn't be there and it was like I needed to do it anyway so I did it.

Like Melody, Julissa stayed with her younger kids all day. Her partner, William, worked full-time and she was responsible for looking after the children. And whereas Julissa's mother cautioned her to not rush things or move too fast,

Julissa found it difficult to adopt this mindset. She wanted to cook for her kids, make a home for them where they could move about freely without having to be restricted to certain places at certain times. I often saw Julissa waiting. Waiting for a bus with her kids, waiting for William to return home from work, waiting for dinner to be served as her children sat beside her. When she was urged to find employment herself, Julissa was reluctant to work during the times William was gone from the shelter because she was afraid to put her children in daycare. She was concerned for their well-being. I wondered if these concerns were influenced by their lives in Gary before coming to the shelter:

> We trying to move as quickly as we can. That's why I'm trying to try to find a job, too. They want me to put my kids in childcare. She really little to me and there a lot of stuff that be happen and I be scared for my kids.

Her daughter, Ezme, was only 6 months old. Julissa wanted to move quickly, but she was reluctant to trust anyone with her baby. The "things" Julissa thought could happen to her children when not in her care may have been largely influenced by the violence she repeatedly witnessed in Gary. Although she described to me big differences between College Town and Gary, the past still shaped her beliefs about what could happen to her children when they were away from her. "Here, you see a kid on the street corner with a lollipop. In Gary, you see kids with cigarettes."

Like Julissa, Sandy was less certain about what the future would bring. She turned to prayer when she needed to reflect, being careful to shield her children from what she worried about:

> I always think like you know what if they don't accept us? Are we going to still be here? What am I going to do if we are still here when our time come up? Where we going to go after this? Yeah, it is hard. It is a lot of thinking, trying to figure out what you going to do...you know, your kids.

The children of the families were often optimistic about moving from the shelter, indicating that parents did protect their kids from unnecessary worry about where they would live beyond the shelter.   Even when Sandy's children, Brittany, Julien and Brianna learned they were returning to Chicago after three months in the shelter and no place of their own to move to, they talked about being reunited with cousins and returning to their former elementary school where there were familiar friends and teachers. Brittany, who noticed the course offerings at the junior high she attended in College Town were much better than her former Chicago public school, expressed some disappointment about leaving, but only for that reason. Julien insisted she wouldn't even miss her trumpet because her old school had a band program. Kendra's daughters, Mariah and Makayla mapped out what they imagined to be their new bedrooms long before their own bedroom became a reality and Lawrence and Darius consistently drew and painted houses in their artwork even when their parents were entrenched in a struggle to secure housing.

The Steadfast Promise of Education: Progress and Setbacks

Whether being invited to take up the identity of a writer in school, understanding that a teacher valued their presence in the school community or experiencing the extra time and care a teacher devoted to them one on one, school experiences influenced the parents in the study to see themselves as strong students or learners and to remain hopeful about what education could do to change their lives and the lives of their children.

 Melissa was enrolled in community college and prided herself on making A's and B's her first year back to school. Julissa hoped to return to school after her youngest was a little older, only 22 credits short of a high school diploma, but extremely proud of her abilities to read and write in both English and Spanish. Shana identified herself as an honor student, as someone who was always eager to

learn more, and as a problem solver. Kendra saw her goal of becoming a nurse as a

real possibility, recalling her earlier successes with educational goals, but she

understood it would not be easy to return to school now because of economic

constraints:

> K: I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a doctor. That was my field,
> medical. I used to watch...and I still watch it to this day...trauma in the
> ER...two or three in the morning I'm up watching that. I don't want to be a
> doctor...it's too late for that...that's eight years. I'm going to do a nurse...I'm
> going to do ER nurse. But that's what I wanted to do, but me and school, we
> don't get along. But I realize too that if there's something I like, I will do it.
> Like I've done medical assistant, CNA. And in both my classes, I was highest.
> So if it's something I want to do, I can do it. It's just I've got to set my mind to
> it.
> M: Yeah, like would you ever do EMT?
> K: I wanted to do that, too.
> M: So maybe when you get settled you'll have some-
> K: I want to go back. I want to go back...I've got these student loans I've got
> to get off my back now. From medical assistant...medical assistant so I've got
> to get those student loans off and then I can go back to school. Then I can do
> EMT.
> M: So did you tell me you were a nursing assistant?
> K: A medical assistant.
> M: A medical assistant at one time...so is that something you'd be interested
> in.
> K: No, I want to be a nurse. I want to do what it is I want to do and I want to
> be an RN. Yeah. So...
> M: You can do that.
> K: I know! I've got to do it. I've just got to get in there! The hardest part is
> starting. Because once I start, it's over with, there's no stopping me. That's
> the hardest part, starting.

Kendra actively resisted the finalized nature of returning to a career as a CNA. She

was resolved to contest that identity by imagining the possibility of becoming a

nurse, while acknowledging the struggle involved in her quest.

Sandy attributed returning to school for her GED nine years after dropping

out of high school, to wanting a better life for her kids:

> S: Being in grammar school, it was easy and fun, but as I got into high school,
> I started hanging out more. And I dropped out.
> M: And did you ever return for your-
> S: -Mhm. My high school diploma.

M: And when did you do that?
S: In '05.
M: And how did that feel?
S: Great, because I was so happy because I wanted to start college. I wanted to go to school.
M: And what made you...when you went back for the high school diploma...what made you decide to do that?
S: My kids...because that was...I had...four kids at the time. Yeah, my kids. And I wanted to get a career so I could make money and get out of the neighborhood I was in. Yeah, for my kids.

Certified as a nursing assistant and a phlebotomist, Sandy felt she had made good progress toward her educational goals, and had hoped to pursue a degree in College Town once settled here. After several phone calls and filing of application materials to Brenthill, a local community college, coming to College Town actually limited her options and delayed her enrollment in courses that she needed to be accepted into a nursing program due to issues of access.

L: -Mhm. I had went up to Brenthill but the problem is Brenthill doesn't have a lot of choices. You have to go up to the main school in Johnston. Brenthill don't have nothing there that I want to do. And I don't want to take just anything. That's the issue I have now. And I could take some of the classes at Brenthill but then I still would have to go to Johnston.
M: Ok. So they didn't have...the College Town location didn't have a lot of the stuff you are interested in.
L: Mhm. They don't have no nursing. None of that. They got more of business, criminal justice, stuff like that.
M: Ok. That was disappointing then.
L: Mhm. Yeah, because I did the financial aid. I did the application to get into the school. I had to switch over my credits from the school in Chicago here. And someone told me to ask them what all they had there in terms of the nursing and the health field. They have nothing. I'm like, wow.

Sandy's access to what Brenthill could offer her as a student was most restricted by her economic position and being unable to afford a car to drive to Brenthill's main campus in Johnston, a thirty minute drive from College Town.

The access to resources that made "starting" possible is evident in the concerns of the parents in the study. Transportation, paying off student loans, finding a job that could pay the bills, and securing daycare for young children were

all obstacles for parents who desired to return to school. Agency and intention to finish a GED, earn a certification or a college degree were present in the lives of the parents, but the barriers to doing so were such that traditional explanations for school failure or of "bootstrapping" and the American dream do not suffice. Despite restricted access and obstacles to continuing education, parents narrated stories that ascribed value to education in ways that suggested they believed school was the path to prosperity for their families.

<p align="center">Conclusion: Complicating the Quest to "Get Yourself Together"</p>

The goals parents voiced were sometimes in conflict with one another. Julissa wanted to return to school and she wanted to find a job in the evenings so that William would be at the shelter to look after the children and so that they could move to a home sooner. Unfortunately, these goals interfered with her overwhelming need to protect her children and her goal to be able to stay home and care for them. On more than one occasion, Julissa referred to fears she had of her youngest child, still an infant, attending daycare while she worked. She said she wanted her daughter to be older before she had someone else care for her. I had these same fears as a mother when my children were infants, having a stranger care for them, but I was privileged to have extended family close by who took care of my children at home while I was working, and still do. I wondered if Julissa's fears were exacerbated by her experiences with the violence she described in Gary and being limited in her daycare choices by the exorbitant daycare costs and high rents in College Town.

Weeks after the family moved from the shelter, Julissa wasn't working and William was struggling to stay employed. They weren't able to make their second month's rent. Julissa's goal of protecting and caring for her children was compromised by her schooling history and her life circumstances that did not hold

nearly enough political or economic clout to overcome the obstacles of not having earned a high school diploma. Even her bilingualism was of little value to employers without the distinction of finishing high school. The tension between her goals and plans and the barriers to meeting them, their interdependence, demonstrate the complex and influential presence of Julissa's schooling, literacy and life histories on her decision-making as a parent and what she could provide for her children.

The planning and preparation the parents engaged in for the future was a key aspect of the literacy sponsorship promoted by the shelter. Navigating the terrain of official texts in the form of credit reports, obtaining proper documentation for voting rights or employer background checks, support with negotiating insurance claims for children's medicine, assistance with job applications, cover letters and resume writing, access to cell phones, and support with enrolling children in school were just a few of the ways parents benefited from the literacy sponsorship at the shelter. While the shelter sponsored the literacy of families in significant ways, other sponsors of literacy in College Town such as the local community college, high quality early childhood education centers, school district transportation beyond the first year to Lighthouse School, and access to long term jobs paying a living wage, were not as accessible due to the parents' lack of economic stability and social networks in College Town, and their limited access to academic power and privilege.

Despite their quest to improve their lives and the prospects for their children's futures, the data show that the parents in the study suffered setbacks and barriers to returning to school, were sometimes restricted on how much time they had to plan and prepare for their transition from the shelter, faced difficult decisions balancing the needs of housing, employment and childcare, and sometimes failed to secure permanent housing during their stay at the shelter. Yet, they remained active in pursuit of these goals, determined to face the ongoing struggle to do better for their families. This ongoing struggle epitomizes their quest to "get yourself

together" as far from the tidy narratives that are more palatable to the public discourse around people who work hard to get ahead in this country.   I wanted to believe that after the time in the shelter the trajectory that each of the parents imagined for themselves and their children could be possible. Rather, in my conversations with caseworkers from the shelter, I began to complicate this trajectory as a zig-zagging line moving in multiple directions, much like how Melody described her days in the shelter. The trajectory was unpredictable, and the ongoing effort to sustain the progress begun in the shelter was more difficult outside for families. Life moved at a faster pace with less support and accomplished goals were delicately held together, their stability dependent on circumstances sometimes beyond the parents' control.

CHAPTER VII

LITERACY AS A PATH TO LIBERTY AND JUSTICE: FOR WHOM?

> There is no question that literacy is necessary to survival and success in the contemporary world-a world where the literate claim authority to set the terms of survival and success, a world that reading and writing abilities have significantly shaped in the first place. But it is important to regard that necessity in the context of political conditions that account for it, or else we sacrifice the humanizing understanding that life can be otherwise than the way we happen to know it and that people who are measured positively by the yardstick of literacy enjoy their privileges because of their power to choose and apply that instrument on their own behalf, not because of their point of development or other innate worthiness" (Knoblauch, 1990, p. 75).

The counterportraits that evolved from this study complicate the official portrait of homelessness and its relationship to literacy and poverty. The data show the families in the study engaged in wide-ranging literacy practices for multiple purposes: economic, social and cultural, they believed in the promise of an education to secure a good job and a permanent home, and they aspired for their children to have better educational and life opportunities than they had growing up. Despite their quest to do better, their attempts to assimilate, and their resistance to the deficit perspectives that surrounded them and their families, the parents in the study did not benefit in significant ways, but continually struggled against the official portrait upheld by differential access to political and economic power. This official portrait imposes a powerful force, pushes back against the counterportraits, and blames the parents for their struggles. The data suggest that the official portrait is largely dismissive of the social problems associated with stark inequality in U.S. society (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Complicating the role of literacy within this larger context of inequality is necessary to understand the wide gulf between the official portrait and the counterportraits presented in this report.

In my teaching, I find myself voicing the promise of literacy to my students. "If you practice, you will do well in school. If you work at it, reading will become

easier and you can do anything you want." When I pair a reading tutor with a young child at the shelter and I see the anticipation of the child's success in their mother's eyes, I see the promise of literacy dwelling there. This promise is pervasive in the economic, political, social and institutional discourses of American culture (Edmondson & Shannon, 1998). Parents believe it. Teachers believe it. Policy makers believe it. Yet, despite increasingly higher levels of literacy in our culture over the past several decades, poverty is on the rise (Berliner, 2014). Although homelessness is multifaceted and is not limited to poverty, the data reveal that the struggles of the families represented in this study were largely predicated on limited access to stable housing, safe neighborhoods, good schools and living wage jobs associated with impoverished inner city neighborhoods. Moreover, the official portrait of homelessness comprised of statistics from the federal government (Samuels et al., 2010) attributes economic hardship to the rising number of homeless families. A significant aspect of the official portrait taken up in schools, Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), positions families living in poverty as lacking in not just material resources, but moral resources. The counterportraits presented in this study suggest homelessness is far more complex than the official portrait projects, and with regard to *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, defiantly challenge the supposed "truths" Payne reported.

Listening to the parents' stories revealed in the counterportraits opens up the possibility of the listener to become part of their struggle "to do better" and allows for the storyteller to recognize who they wish to become. As Shana suggested when she told me it was nice to talk about her life with me, if the only stories imposed on families living in and transitioning from shelter are those associated with the discourse of institutions such as the shelter, public assistance and schools, perhaps fewer Discourses are available to the storyteller in these contexts. The dialogical aspect of storytelling allows for the storyteller to recognize

the "unfinalizability" of their life as they discover for themselves what identities they desire in the stories they choose to tell and what is possible for the change they are seeking (Frank, 2012). This dialogical aspect of storytelling lends itself to the central goal of counterportraiture:

> Counterportraiture is research that is action based because its very essence involves changing individual minds and thought collectives both locally and beyond. It is a way to collaboratively challenge, interrogate, and act upon the suffering inflicted by the official portrait (Meyer, 2010).

As I actively engage in the political work of interrogating the official portrait through the dissemination of this research report, I realize this would not be possible if I hadn't listened to the parents in the study as they described their steadfastness to change the course of their lives, despite overwhelming obstacles and frequent setbacks. The stories the parents told suggest that much potential lies in what they are invited to believe about themselves as parents, as teachers of their children and as valued members of a community through the act of storytelling. This narrative identifying (Frank, 2010) contributes to sustaining a quest narrative despite the obstacles the families face and does the political work of pushing back against the imposing official portrait that grossly simplifies the reasons for homelessness and poverty (Meyer, 2010).

Unpacking the Official Portrait: Political Ideologies, Literacy and Poverty

Several political ideologies posit different rationales for poverty with heightened levels of literacy (whether moral or skill-based) as the common solution. The neoconservative agenda, most closely associated with Payne's work, supports the notion of "lifting oneself up by the bootstraps" or bootstrapping as a solution, and blames the rise in poverty as a symptom of a decaying moral character in communities and individuals, thereby ignoring political, cultural or economic

injustices. Edmondson & Shannon (1998) summarize the neoconservative position

here,

> According to neo-conservatives, then, every American should become
> morally literate and strive not only to be self-disciplined, responsible, honest,
> loyal, and faithful, but to work and persevere. They implore us to read life
> and all texts that we encounter through these moral lenses. In return for
> these efforts, neoconservatives promise a safer, easier, and quieter future
> because a morally literate work force will be able to take advantage of the
> opportunities the economy affords all of us. Poverty, racism, and sexism end
> when everyone acts virtuously. The struggle then is not to negotiate political,
> cultural, or economic justice. Rather, it is to find ways to promote moral
> literacy among the most vulnerable in society-one person at a time (p. 112).

This view serves the interests of the more privileged members of society to preserve

positions within the middle, upper-middle or wealthy classes, while actively

undermining a fair playing field for other people's children by virtue of comfortable

access to paid private lessons, enrichment activities, housing located where new

schools are built, and access to nutritious food and health care, to name a few. The

official portrait, further simplified in Payne's framework, suggests these privileges

are rewards for hard work and persistence and another person's failure to parent or

persevere. When we only attend to the official portrait, we risk failing to recognize

the benefit of our position in society in maintaining the access that allows us to

thrive both economically, politically and socially, passing on that access to our

children from one generation to the next (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Alternatively, the neoliberal view argues that poverty is not a symptom of

lack of intelligence or moral character, but rather a lack of opportunity to develop

the skills necessary to succeed economically. This perspective blames institutions,

such as public schools, relinquishing the argument that those who can afford to

attain the skills critical to success in an increasingly competitive market have a

distinct and unfair advantage in entering the workforce, but fails to examine the

larger context of inequality that reigns down on public schools and deters their

ability to achieve increasingly higher standards (Berliner, 2014). This perspective is a driving influence in the adoption of charter schools as a replacement for public schools that have been labeled as failing institutions. Yet, the most vulnerable schools in the struggle to preserve public education are urban schools serving students of color from low-income neighborhoods. Cuban (2004) espouses,

> No colorblind rhetoric about equal access to high academic standards can make up for the uncomfortable fact that urban schools, in their funding and staffing, end up duplicating the nation's social and economic inequalities-except for the few students who become grist for the media mill as "success" stories. The democratic promise of schools as institutions that offer personal success, social stability, and economic growth to all Americans is eroded by the corrosive effects of economic and social structures that sustain poverty and racism (Cuban, p. 179-180).

However, although the neoliberal view undermines the neoconservative deficit view of people living in poverty, instead it blames teachers, particularly those who are working in underfunded, understaffed and sometimes dilapidated facilities in America's inner cities (Kozol, 2005). Further, the current neoliberal agenda promotes literacy as the cure for eradicating poverty, promoting a high-stakes testing environment, which leads to the closure of some schools and further privatization (Ravitch, 2010).

Neither of these political ideologies are liberating to people experiencing poverty. The neoliberal agenda punishes underperforming schools, reducing learning to decontextualized paper and pencil tasks that promote drill and practice over critical thought, while the neoconservative agenda blames poverty on parents for not behaving in a particular moral character which would allow them to lift themselves up by their bootstraps and conform to a middle class life.

Privilege can restrict perspectives that endanger or question the existing social order, the position a privileged life affords, and the way particular forms of literacy justify positions of privilege. This privileged state of mind may work to

deny the existing inequalities that sustain the official portrait; that families from underrepresented groups are inferior in their pursuit of literacy and education, thus explaining their failure to achieve middle-class status. This denial is represented in the U.S. political discourse that justifies market-driven approaches to education to give everyone an equal opportunity, repeatedly stressing the idea that everyone will do better over time and can have the opportunity to reap the benefits of a middle class life. Rarely is poverty addressed in politics. Racial inequality is equally silenced.

Moreover, both the current democratic administration's and the GOP's agendas for educational reform privilege competition among schools and monetary awards based on test score rankings which lead to further privatization and the dismantling of the public system (Ravitch, 2010). As in the case of Melody, the charter system she praised did little to combat the inequalities present in her former community that compelled her to desert her neighborhood public school to ensure a better education for her children. Charter schools may capitalize on the social problems associated with inner city poverty such as violence and drugs. Public schools are overwhelmed with the task of addressing these problems in the lives of their students while under tremendous pressure to raise test scores in order to keep schools from closing (Berliner, 2014). The charter system's beneficiaries are not necessarily the students. The spread of charter schools benefits the executives who profit from opening their schools and closing public schools in America's inner cities, privileging privatization over changes that instead benefit the majority of children, their families, and the neighborhoods where they live (Delpit, 2012).

Assimilation Without Access

Herein lies the paradox: The parents in this study value the literacy practices and Discourses of school even though in many ways, their own schooling histories and the school experiences of their children undermine the literacy routines and rituals of their families. The parents resisted some of what their children's teachers and schools advised, but for the most part, the way they talked about school and engaged in school literacy were compatible with what teachers and schools stressed as most important. Parents took up the literacy Discourses of parents who value education with the intent that school was a necessary and critical path to improving their lives and the opportunities of their children, even when this was not the reality they experienced.

A desire to assimilate was a driving force in the lives of the parents who saw new possibilities for their children in the new community: better schools, extracurricular choices for their children, safer streets, steady employment and the possibility of a college education. Yet, for many of the parents, these struggles continued in College Town, despite their best intentions. Reading to their children at bedtime, completing homework, attending school events, trying to keep children in a school that they could no longer attend due to lack of transportation and access to affordable housing nearby, were just some of the ways parents engaged in the quest to "get yourself together."

I came to see the efforts of the parents in the study as part of a societal requirement to adopt a middle class mindset (work hard and you will get ahead, read to your children at bedtime and they will succeed in school) with the promise it holds, while being repeatedly rejected as outside of the margins of what it means to be middle class and being denied access to a middle class life. Race further complicated this tension as it reflected the discourse of the community concerning the "changing demographics" and the "Othering" of primarily single African

American mothers and their children that had moved to College Town from their former neighborhoods seeking a better life for their families. The public discourse suggested that the citizens of College Town had reason to fear the influx of African American children from inner city Chicago moving to our quiet Midwestern university town and attending the same schools as our children.

<center>Subjectivities: Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender</center>

Clearly the data could allow for a more focused attention to race, ethnicity class, and gender as illustrated in the perspectives shared by the participants; their willingness to privilege whiteness and share deficit perspectives of people in their former neighborhoods. My position as a middle class white woman likely influenced these perspectives, but the participants' responses also demonstrate the overwhelming presence of these deficit perspectives in mainstream discourse. My intention is not to highlight these responses as confirmation of deficits, but to further complicate the relationship between researcher and participants particularly across ethnic and class lines, to interrogate widely cemented deficit myths that surround social constructions of race and class, and to emphasize the value I place upon the cultural and linguistic diversity represented in the narratives of the parents.

Melody told me that her friends were skeptical about her sitting down to an interview with me. She said they told her, "Why you going to sit down and tell some white lady your business?" She said she replied, "It's not like that. It's not a secret. It's a testimony. It's a story. It's going to help somebody else." I recognize the enormous responsibility of the researcher inherent in this statement as I struggled to represent the narratives of my participants without undermining my goal to value their strengths and talk back to the official portrait. For some readers, the representation of African American Vernacular English may do more to represent a

deficit than to illustrate the legitimacy of the lives represented in the stories. This was not my intent as a researcher. I value the strengths of both the content, and the linguistic representation of the stories (Labov, 1972) the participants shared with me.

Melody said she began to trust me when I brought my son to the shelter on several occasions for the family art and story hour. She said she could see that I was a mom like her. Though I interviewed one father in the study, I spent most of my time with children and their mothers. Our shared humanity and identities as mothers reminded me of the connections between us. Yet, the distance between the mothers in the study and I also contributed to moments when I would exclaim, "I have to get ready to go home for dinner", without thinking how this fell on the ears of children and mothers anxiously awaiting their own home. In these moments, I flushed, quickly changed the subject, and scolded myself inside. Capturing the reality of parenting in the context of homelessness is delicate in that none of the mothers sought my pity or sympathy, but rather carried on frank conversations with me about the daily grind of homework, colds, school, housing and work. I desired this frankness, but longed to acknowledge their motherhood under economic and emotional constraints that I had never faced. I don't believe I would have learned so much about the lives of the participants if they had seen me simply as a researcher. While I acknowledge my class, race and ethnic background distanced me from my participants in critical ways, I sought to work across these lines with an inclusive lens of parenting and the challenges, rewards and desires it presents for all who share in this identity.

The parents in the study, just by virtue of their stay at a homeless shelter, might be viewed in the meritocratic sense as individuals who have failed to achieve the standard of literacy or the Discourses that might lift them out of poverty, as Payne's framework suggests. This meritocratic perspective might also assume that

parents didn't work hard enough, care enough or want enough. This perspective might also assume that the same will be true for their children because the values of the parents will be passed along to their children. Yet, in my interviews and my observations of parents' interactions with their children at the shelter, parents' high expectations for their children's lives to be better than their lives suggest another perspective. Literacy is not a cure for poverty, for school failure, for drugs and violence, for lack of health care (Edmondson & Shannon, 1998). These are false assumptions that perpetuate the social and racial inequalities that deny some families access to the conditions necessary to thrive and learn in their communities, neighborhoods and schools (Berliner, 2014). Literacy will not have the liberating power we associate with it until conditions under which people labor, learn and live are more humane and just (Freire, 1970). For the parents in the study, leaving the inner city was part of their quest, but I believe it is critical that we acknowledge their citizenship as legitimate and valuable, not as a nuisance, a taboo topic or a social ill "not in my backyard." This acknowledgement involves acceptance, but also efforts to increase access to good jobs, a living wage, affordable housing and high-achieving schools for all families in our community. The dialogical nature of the counterportraits is undermined without acknowledgement and willingness to see the alternative perspectives and listen to the stories represented therein (Frank, 2012).

<div align="center">Family Literacy Sponsorship</div>

My role as a sponsor of literacy at the shelter was complicated by my pragmatic need to help parents address their concerns associated with school work, and to negotiate possible roles of new sponsors of literacy to the shelter such as reading buddies and programs designed to promote early reading skills that would also increase access to child-centered activities at the shelter. I struggled to make

known my overwhelming interest in the literacies families practiced that went unaddressed in these formal meetings, such as William's imaginative story reading with his children, the shared Bible reading revealed to me by Sandy's youngest daughter, Brianna, and the collection of comics Martez, Melody's son, authored, illustrated, and carried with him from Chicago to the shelter and then to his new home. These were the literacy practices that would go unnoticed in the official circles of literacy sponsorship. Yet these were the literacies most dear to the parents and their children, because they were integral to the social and cultural relationships in their real lives.

Conversely, as much as I didn't want to spend the family art and story hour completing worksheets sent home from school, I understood the deeper implications of what it meant for the families to comply with school expectations. The data suggest that assimilation into school literacy practices in some ways magnified their marginalized status, but stemmed from concern for their child's education and was fueled by their desire to be perceived by the school as good parents and teachers of their children. As a mother, I, too, had this desire, but entrenchment in the social, political, academic and economic privilege afforded to my family in College Town insured that my son's completed homework would kick back a much greater payoff in terms of achievement and I would be less likely to have to sacrifice the literacies of my home in the process.

Family literacy programs targeted at families from low-income households that promote school literacy practices in homes, deny legitimacy to the literacies families engage in outside of those sanctioned by school (Auerbach, 1989). Yet, much of school-sanctioned literacy is dependent upon access and reward in literacy sponsorship.

Brandt (2001) argues that outcomes in literacy are largely influenced by the public institutions and the social infrastructures people come into contact with from

day to day and this may help to explain how inequality is connected to disparities in literacy achievement. The shelter, located far from the school where the children attended, limited parent access to school events and undermined their desires to be involved in the education of their children. The public library, though accessible by a city bus line, was too far for families to walk on Sundays, when no buses were available. The downtown association of College Town often sponsored literacy events for children on the weekends in conjunction with the public library, and the university, but again, the distance to the downtown area could make these events less accessible to families due to shelter curfew hours and lack of transportation. The geographic position of the shelter in a low-income housing area limited access to downtown amenities, such as computers, library programming for school-age children, and large book collections. Affordable housing near the downtown did not exist in College Town, further restricting access for families dependent on public transportation beyond their stay at the shelter.

Brandt (2001) says, "The commodification of literacy can inflame the effects of discrimination by race and class that are embedded in the social and economic marrow of most communities" (p. 184). She argues that approaches to family literacy must recognize the relationship between the work parents do in their occupations and literacy,

> The circulation of work-related literacies in households has contributed significantly to the diffusion of formal knowledge and literacy practices in this society. When we appreciate the connection between parental work and household literacy, we might better see why it is so urgent to make expanding education and employment opportunities (and not just bedtime story reading) a cornerstone of family literacy programs (p. 200).

The income gap in U.S. society severely limits the literacy resources available to people working minimum wage jobs, the dignity a good paying job affords parents who are able to provide for their children, and the time families have to engage in

the complex ways literacy is represented in the cultural, social and institutional spaces of our lives. Family literacy programs that explain the achievement gap between students from varying race, ethnic and class backgrounds as deficits inherent in individual families deny wider systemic social problems fueled by equally large gaps in income and quality of life for families from underrepresented groups (Berliner, 2014). Policy decisions that shape family literacy programs without the overarching goal of greater equality in the U.S. subscribe to the myth that literacy can eradicate the impact of poverty on people's lives.

Yet, broadening the definition of family literacy does not go far enough, as there are no forms of literacy sponsorship for eradicating poverty, mental illness, domestic violence and other forms of oppression that may contribute to or stem from the existence of differential power structures in U.S. society (Street, 2001). More promising is the notion that literacy sponsorship has the potential to open up possibilities for individuals to reinvent themselves. This requires the sponsors themselves to reflect deeply on their intentions and to understand the individuals they are sponsoring by listening to their stories and attempting to understand the Discourses they engage in as they take new risks to define who they are and who they can become.

So why is it important to consider the Discourses parents engaged in and the shifting identities these Discourses represented? Family literacy sponsorship is a complex and multilayered context for understanding the ways literacy is defined, controlled and ascribed value by people in power. Family literacy sponsorship is also inextricably linked to identity. Individuals engage in identity work through the literacies they engage in and the Discourses they take up for social and cultural purposes. Literacy sponsors can honor these literacies or dismiss them. Likewise, the sponsored can reject, resist or shape literacy sponsorship in critical ways as the sponsored engage in identity work through the Discourses they project. McCarthey

and Moje (2002) remind us that literacy and literate practices are particular ways for performing identities. The literacy sponsorship available to families experiencing homelessness in this study both empowered and constrained this identity work by positioning parents and children in particular ways across multiple contexts at the shelter, at school and in the wider community of College Town.

<u>Storied Discourses in the Space of the Family Art and Story Hour</u>

How did the parents in the study take up the "dance with words, deeds, values, feelings, other people, objects, tools, technologies, places and times" (Gee, 2008, p. 155) representative of a particular socially situated identity during their participation in the family art and story hour? What do the Discourses the parents engaged in through the stories they shared tell us about how they were "holding their own" in the face of vulnerability (Frank, 2012)?

My sponsorship of the family art and story hour, as well as the interviews with parents, provided a context for parents to take up Discourses consistent with their goals and aspirations for the future. The family art and story hour invited parents to participate in literacy events with their children without restrictions shaped by requirements or specific programs that required particular ways of participating. For Julissa, art and story hour was a weekly opportunity to quietly observe her children playing, listening to stories, writing and creating. For Sandy and Melody, child-centered activities at the shelter gave them time and space to look over documents related to housing and employment or catch up with loved ones on the phone. For Kendra, the art and story hour was an invitation to engage in literacy events with her children and without threat of judgment. The family art and story hour also gave parents the space to inquire about homework, voice concerns to me about their children's progress in school, or initiate language play, drawing, or book reading with their children.

In some ways, I came to see the art and story hour as a space where parents could enact the Discourses representative of the socially situated identities captured in the stories they told in interviews. The literacies children and parents valued the most were afforded a broader legitimacy in the space of the art and story hour because I invited families to co-author the activities and events. Co-authoring was part of the ebb and flow of the weekly sessions when children in particular continued to plan and create on the days I was not present at the shelter. I would often find their continuation of something we started together or new projects the children started independently in the cabinets where I stored art and writing supplies. Some weeks children wanted to show me something they created in between my visits to the shelter or tell me how they desired to spend the art and story time as soon as I arrived for the next session.

Coauthoring was represented in the drawings Lawrence created of his family members and my invitation for him to tell me about his drawings as I recorded his words beside his sketches. Weeks after meeting with Lawrence at the shelter for art and story hour, I learned that Julissa was saving drawings he worked on in the hours after school. Expecting to see drawings more typical of young children, his drawings were surprisingly sophisticated representations of the faces of people in his family. Lawrence told me his mom taught him how to draw. I invited him to tell me about his drawings so I could write his words on the page. Lawrence's words expressed how much he longed for his family back in Gary. Lawrence's younger brother, Darius and his mother smiled and laughed as he described his beloved uncle. His drawing and my invitation to compose gave Lawrence an opportunity to reflect on missing his uncle since coming to the shelter, something he may not have had the opportunity to talk about at school (Lewison et al., 2008).

Co-authoring shaped the activities we engaged in on a weekly basis. Reader's theater scripts I provided guided our rehearsals of plays, but improvisation in

rehearsals and the actual performance was highly valued by all participants. Parents did not correct children as they miscued in the script in order to add their own dialect to the character dialogue and narrative, rendering it more personally meaningful. Children fashioned costumes from the contents of the children's room; a pom-pom became a wig; a soft baby-stacking toy, the perfect hat for a grandmother; a round object, a ball. Brittany, Julien and Brianna transformed a pile of art materials into a plethora of Halloween decorations and created invitations to a party. They rehearsed scary stories over and over again to perform for younger residents at the shelter and their parents. Inspired by the stories we performed, Cassandra wrote her own play about an old woman who mistakenly thought she had found a ten thousand dollar bill when it was only a ten-dollar bill. She titled the play *You Need New Glasses* and assembled a cast of children, Rhoda, Mariah and Makayla, to rehearse and perform the roles in the story she created. These moments best illustrate what the family art and story hour was intended to do: provide families a space to engage in meaningful literacies and to recognize their strengths as they continued to create memories during their stay at the shelter.

Yet, in other moments during my sponsorship of the family art and story hour, I constrained participation in significant ways. When I brought up how well Brittany, Julien and Brianna performed Little Red Riding Hood for the shelter staff during an interview with their mother, Sandy, she told me they were always putting on little plays and dances with their cousins in Chicago and asking the adults to watch. I could hear in her story a protest that I used as a parent when caretakers of my children pointed something out to me that I felt a larger part of than they realized. I recognized that I had never asked the girls if they ever made up their own performances or if they wanted to, but rather controlled the conditions for performance with my own agenda.

Similarly, one day while helping Darius, Julissa and William's youngest son, write his name, I failed to recognize that I was intervening too much in the process. When Darius hesitated to write his name after asking him to sign his painting, I printed his name across the top of another sheet for him to look at. He still didn't begin to write so I assumed he did not have the experience to do so. I asked him if I could write it with him and took his hand in mine to practice forming the letters on the page. Julissa was observing us while holding the baby and came over to show me that Darius could write his name, he just didn't recognize his name the way I had written it. Darius was hesitant to show me what he knew until his mother encouraged him to write his name. Then he proceeded to write his name in capital letters across the top of his painting without assistance from either of us. Julissa told me they worked on his name a lot together, reminding me of the former moments in my parenting that I enacted the Discourses of "parent as teacher."

I did not plan for these moments of co-authoring or tension, as I could never have been that creative or insightful about what children desired or parents valued, nor did I always recognize my preconceived notions before I acted on them. These moments were shaped in the negotiations of the family art and story hour, sometimes after mothers required that homework be completed first, but clearly valued for the relief or distraction this time brought to their children. I believe this was a critical aspect of why parents and children trusted me with their stories and attended the art and story hour on a regular basis. If my approach to the family art and story hour had been more characteristic of family literacy programs that view families with deficits to be fixed and privilege school-sanctioned literacy practices (Auerbach, 1989), I don't think I would have experienced the same level of trust from the parents in the interviews and participation from the families in the weekly family art and story hour sessions. Likewise, if I had ignored parent input into the

literacies of their children, dismissing their expertise or undervaluing what their children knew, I don't think I would have been afforded this trust.

<div align="center">The Recognition of Possible Selves</div>

All the interviews I conducted lasted at least an hour, some extending well beyond. I did not interview parents until their individual families participated in the art and story hour for at least a few weeks. The stories parents shared during the interviews enacted particular ways of being in the world. Although my questions were largely focused on reading and writing in their daily lives, their stories encompassed a much larger context for thinking about literacy in the overlapping contexts of their former neighborhoods and schools, their role as parents and teachers of their children, and their ongoing struggle to improve the lives of their families. These stories shaped the counterportraits in ways that called up alternative explanations for homelessness, resisting the official portrait's simplification of their lives.

Teen Mothers

The stories parents shared during the interview revealed the struggles they had endured in childhood and young adulthood, and how they were working to make sure their children would not repeat their mistakes or have to endure the same struggles. All the mothers in the study referred to themselves as teen mothers, and enacted Discourses of mature mothers who had learned from the past, determined to show their children that they should wait to start a family; that a career or good job, an education and economic stability would make their path easier. They regarded their own struggles as a strong example to their children to negotiate and avoid similar challenges as teens and parents.

Single Parents

Melody, Shana, Kendra and Sandy took up the Disourses representative of a determined single parent, voicing how they had overcome obstacles in their lives without a supportive partner. Melody said she talked with her older kids about why they didn't see their father and tried to help them understand, but knew the relationship with her children was the most important if their father was not going to make decisions with her children's best interests in mind. Shana said her children had different fathers because she was not willing to stay with a man who did not help support the family. Sandy assured me that she had always been a single parent and was fine. Despite the uncertainty of where she would go after the shelter, she insisted that things were "easy" on her own. After her daughters' father died, Kendra realized how supportive their father had been with meeting their basic needs, but she was determined to support them on her own now. She wanted her daughters to see "Ok, Mommy is paying these bills. That's what Mommy is doing for us." My position as a married woman with two young children perhaps influenced the mothers in the study to talk about their status as single parents and to suggest that they were capable of raising their children alone, despite the public discourse that largely regards single parenthood as a social ill.

Taking on challenges without a partner to help raise their children was not viewed as a setback, a deficit, or an obstacle to achieving their goals. Managing the family's transition from the shelter, checking on homework, nurturing and disciplining children, were responsibilities the single mothers in the study did not bring up as struggles, but as matters of what needed to be done to move forward in their lives. "Get up and get on" was captured in Sandy's early morning sit-ups on the concrete floor of her room at the shelter before departing for her 6 am shift at a fast food restaurant, in Shana's hands-free cell phone that she wore to deal with the business of the day while she oversaw the homework of her daughters or their

activities during art and story hour, in Melody's Sunday morning trips to church to continue the family traditions she valued and deemed would provide opportunity for her own children, and in Kendra's persistence in her job as a housecleaner late into her pregnancy in order to make her daughters' plans for their own home a reality.

Devoted Parents and Teachers

William reflected on the mistakes his mother made raising him, leaving him at a young age, and how he wanted to do better for his own kids. William was also critical of other people at the shelter who he perceived did not give their children proper attention or care. He talked to his oldest child Lawrence about avoiding trouble and a life in jail, where William's younger brother's decisions had led him. When Lawrence found an egg and spent weeks writing and talking about how he loved his baby bird, thinking it would soon be born, William took Lawrence to a nearby tree to return the egg to its mother. Even though he knew the egg would not be cared for, William wanted to protect Lawrence from realizing it would not ever hatch. He shielded his kids from arguments between people at the shelter by retreating to their family room to read, write and draw. William read to his children at night after returning home from work. He recalled fondly how his young sons repeatedly fell asleep with markers in their hands because he couldn't get them to stop writing and drawing.

After being allowed to run the streets as a teen, Sandy didn't let her own children go outside their apartment in their inner city neighborhood without her. She made sure they had their homework finished each school night and even in her absence, Brittany, Sandy's oldest daughter took on this role for her younger sisters. The girls were quick to use common courtesies and if one of them forgot, they reminded each other. A disapproving glance from their mother, though silent, often

reformed undesirable behavior. In the last couple weeks of their stay at the shelter, I noticed Sandy's daughters asking about her more often, and scolding one another when their routine sibling disagreements escalated, so as not to disturb their mom. Even though Sandy indicated to me that she did worry about what they would do, she said she was careful not to worry her children and this showed in their optimism about moving back to Chicago. Sandy encouraged her daughters to decorate the children's room and practice stories to read to the younger children on Halloween. The last day before they departed for Chicago, Sandy smiled as she recorded their performance of scary stories for the younger residents during the shelter Halloween party on her cell phone.

  Kendra's perspective on "get yourself together" was centered on reestablishing a bond with her children after leaving them frequently with their grandmother because she was overwhelmed as a teen mom. She bounced, cuddled and played with other people's babies at the shelter, aiding younger mothers who she perceived needed the guidance that she hadn't received as a young mother. Kendra often participated in the literacy activities her daughters engaged in, taking on the role of audience, director and sometimes a reader in the plays we practiced and performed. She marveled in what she was learning about her daughters as readers and artists. Kendra also wasn't afraid to express frustration to me about parenting. She acknowledged that she sometimes had enough and would become impatient with her daughters. Kendra apologized when I saw her raise her voice to her youngest daughter, Makayla, who was persisting about something she wanted even after her mother refused. I knew my own limitations as a parent in the privacy of my home or car and recognized this privacy was severely restricted in the shelter for Kendra's family and the other families enrolled in the study at the shelter.

  Melody praised her mother's advocacy and the efforts she made to keep her kids off the streets through involvement in the church and careful selection of her

children's schools. Melody took this same approach with her own children through their regular attendance at Sunday church services, by urging them to take part in public literacy performances of their faith in the church community and her determination to keep them at Lighthouse School. She reflected on staying open to her children and having conversations with them about sex so that they wouldn't be afraid to talk to her about their concerns and so she had a better chance of preventing them from starting their own families too early in life. Long after she moved from the shelter, Melody was advocating for bussing for her children to Lighthouse because she felt it was a better school than the one in her neighborhood.

Shana repeatedly referred to her life as an example for her daughters, including her mistakes and struggles. After she secured full-time work as a housekeeper in a local hotel, she established a routine in which she would return to the shelter after her shift ended at 4:00 pm to take her daughters to the public library where they could complete their schoolwork more easily than in their shared room at the shelter. Shana took up the same strict routines around homework that her mother and father did when she was growing up, but I also observed her listen to her daughters read, ask about what they were reading in school and plop down in one of the small chairs in the children's room for a play after a long shift at the hotel. She prided herself on being a role model as an avid reader for her children, citing her favorite authors. Shana believed her children loved to read because she instilled that desire in them through her own example.

Julissa talked about her aspirations to teach her children Spanish, her native language, so that they might have greater opportunities in life for finding a good job. She watched patiently as her children painted and drew pictures during art and story hour, sometimes initiating practice with Darius, age 4, who had never been to preschool and was attempting to write more. She shared the boys' collection of pictures and writing with me and talked about her intentions to get a container for

each of them to store their drawings and writing as keepsakes. Julissa asked me about Lawrence's report card when she did not understand some of the descriptors and was concerned about whether he was doing well in school. The last day of the school year, I watched her arrive just on time with Lawrence to participate in his kindergarten graduation ceremony at Lighthouse after missing the city bus and borrowing cab fare from another resident at the shelter so they could be there for the event.

<center>Resistance to the Official Portrait: Overlapping Discourses</center>

The official portrait of homelessness restricts the possibility of contesting identities by essentializing what it means to be homeless, often aligned with what it means to live in poverty. Yet the intentions, stories and actions of Shana, Kendra, Julissa, William, Melody and Sandy represented Discourses consistent with the words, deeds, values and actions of "caring parents," "parents as teachers," "parents as advocates," and "parents as role models" not represented in the official portrait. Gee (2005) writes,

> The key to Discourses is "recognition." If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity), here-and-now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer) (p. 27).

Discourses shift and change with context. Discourses can be contested and boundaries can be pushed for creating new Discourses. Discourses can overlap and more than one Discourse can be recognized at once. Gee refers to "recognition work" as when people "…try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing" (p. 29). The data show multiple Discourses

that resist the official portrait as parents engaged in identity work through their stories and their actions, shaping the counterportraits.

For Kendra, Shana, Melody and Sandy, the Discourse of single motherhood overlapped with the Discourses of teachers, advocates, role models and caretakers of their children, countering prevailing deficit perspectives on what it means to be a single parent. For William, the Discourse of an African American male raised in poverty overlapped with the Discourses of a devoted, caring and involved father who avoided street activity that would lead to jail as a youth, resisting devastating deficit perspectives on what it means to be a Black male from the inner city (Alexander, 2010). For Julissa, the Discourses of an immigrant child raised in poverty and the racist attitudes of her family toward African Americans, a teen mother and a high school dropout, overlapped with the Discourses of a bilingual woman, a language teacher and a proud mother of her multiracial children from a linguistically and culturally diverse background.

The counterportraits are not a final summation of the lives of the parents and the children in this study. Summations only have a place in the official portraits that strictly define who people are and limit who they may become. Rather, the counterportraits represent the identity work of the parents as they confronted their ongoing struggles with the determination and hope that their lives could improve. I recognize that the stories the parents told me are stories they have told before and will tell again, just as I revise the stories of my own life as I seek new identities and contest old ones. I recall a day at the shelter that one of the case workers told me to take off my rose-colored glasses for a moment. He wanted me to see that despite people's best intentions, good intentions aren't enough. I understand this perspective and I empathized with the caseworker's attempts to support the goal of "get up and get on" for William and Julissa, even when several of his attempts seemed futile. Yet I am compelled to understand more about how parents who have

enormous obstacles to face sustain a narrative habitus, or repertoire of stories that their lives are not finalized, but can be revised and improved (Frank, 2010). The ongoing struggle requires intention and yes, perhaps rose-colored glasses, as parents search for new possibilities in the context of social and racial injustice and inequality.

Storytelling allows for the ongoing revision of how we make sense of our lives and challenges the official portraits or "truths" told about people like us. Frank (2012) writes, "People tell stories in order to revise their self-understanding and any story stands to be revised in subsequent stories" (p.37) The authoritative summarization of findings in a research report diminishes the potential for opening up to dialogical understandings and the possibility of listening and responding to the subsequent stories Frank (2012) describes. While research studies come to an end, the persons represented in the research continue to live and revise the stories they tell, constantly redefining themselves in the world. The data illustrate the multiple perspectives conveyed through the stories the families chose to tell, and highlight the ways families made sense of their lives in the shelter and will continue to do so beyond the scope of this study.

<div align="center">Conclusion: Talking Back through Counterportraits</div>

As I compose the final chapter of this study, Melody is preparing to complete her third semester at Brenthill, the local community college. Her two oldest children are still walking to Lighthouse and her youngest child is attending their neighborhood school, Washington. Melody has shifted her perspective about Washington because Dylen has adjusted well to being at the school and she doesn't have to worry about him walking with his older siblings the long distance to Lighthouse. She told me she is still working on finding a car she can afford so she

can drive her children to school this winter. This is part of Melody's ongoing struggle to improve life for her family in College Town.

Sandy and her daughters are temporarily staying with her mother in a one-bedroom apartment after returning to Chicago just over two weeks ago. When we spoke on the phone, Sandy said she was hired as a certified nursing assistant and she plans to move out after two pay stubs. She said she will try to look in the suburbs for better schools and safer streets for her kids if she can afford the rent. Sandy's caseworker at the shelter told me that within one week of her departure, she got approval for subsidized family housing for two years that would have allowed her to save most of her income. Unfortunately, because she was no longer residing at the shelter or in College Town, they could not hold the housing for Sandy and her children. She told her caseworker that she plans to return to College Town as soon as her Section 8 voucher becomes available. The waitlist for Section 8 housing is much shorter in College Town than it is in Chicago. He estimates her voucher will become available sometime after the first of the year. In the meantime, Sandy will try to find her own place and make the rent each month, pay the bills on time and provide for her children. This is part of Sandy's ongoing struggle to secure permanent housing for her family.

Last summer, Kendra had a baby girl, despite her daughters' insistence that their mom was carrying a boy. Although I didn't talk to Kendra after she moved from the shelter because her phone number changed, a staff member at the shelter said she stopped in shortly after the baby was born and said she and her family were doing well. They were living in an apartment in a community adjacent to College Town.

Shana was still working at the hotel last summer when I spotted her as I was driving in the downtown area of College Town. I have not seen her since and I was unable to find a new contact number to reach her. One can reasonably assume that

her continued employment may contribute to a more positive outlook for her family, but five months later, it is difficult to predict what other obstacles may have been encountered in her struggle to "get yourself together."

William and Julissa have returned to Gary, Indiana with their three children after suffering a series of setbacks in College Town. Julissa became ill after they moved from the shelter. She had a condition that caused the whole left side of her face to swell, causing her eye to swell shut. She was able to see a doctor through a free medical clinic, but her condition persisted. The family's caseworker from the shelter continued to check in on them for months after their departure from the shelter, particularly because they were having trouble keeping up with the rental payments. William could not keep his job because he was staying home to take care of Julissa. The caseworker said Julissa was disabled, panicked and distraught about her condition and didn't want to be left alone to care for their nine-month old daughter, Ezme.

When the family's Section 8 housing voucher became available, an official in the housing department in College Town made a provision that would allow William and Julissa to use their voucher in Gary, Indiana because they were being threatened with eviction in College Town. An eviction would have resulted in the family losing their Section 8 housing in College Town, so the provision allowed them to take their voucher and secure permanent housing in Gary. When I asked the family's caseworker about whether the neighborhood where they would live in Gary would be safer than their former neighborhood, he said, "The whole city of Gary is dangerous. You'd have to go underground to be safe in Gary. At least they've got the stability of permanent housing and family there too".

During their transition back to Indiana, Julissa called the caseworker because she was panicked that officials at the Section 8 office in Gary did not believe that they had their daughter, Ezme, with them in College Town when they were

determining the number of bedrooms for the housing voucher. He said Julissa was distressed that they didn't believe she had her baby with her. The shelter was able to provide evidence that Julissa was telling the truth so they were able to get an apartment large enough for their three children. These challenges are part of William and Julissa's ongoing struggle as they return to shaping a life for their family in Gary, Indiana.

I believe we have a moral obligation to read the counterportraits in this study as ongoing struggles to do better and resistance to a "finalized" life. Sandy and her children will likely move again when their housing voucher comes up, while Julissa and William made the decision to return to a place that finally provides them with permanent housing, despite the unsafe streets for their children and William's prayers that they would never have to return. Melody's dream of owning her own home may be years away, but is part of what she believes is possible for her children if she gets the support she needs now with schooling and housing in College Town. These decisions are not about handouts, as some may read, but have to do with the relentless quest to do better, to protect and provide for children, to live and thrive in a community. These are the stories the counterportraits tell and the parents will continue to revise in their lives as they "get up and get on."

The potential dialogue these counterportraits spark continues, honoring the ways parents experiencing homelessness might narrate their lives and the Discourses and the identity work their stories represent. The power of stories cannot be underestimated as parents experiencing homelessness contest old identities and adopt new ones as they narrate their lives. bell hooks (1989) writes,

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject-the liberated voice (p. 9).

If we pay attention, the counterportraits allow us to struggle together for dignified living and working conditions, for greater equality, as we add new stories to our own repertoires, challenging our preconceived notions of homelessness and of families living in America's inner cities.

More research in the lives and literacies of families experiencing homelessness is needed to allow for the "talking back" hooks (1989) describes. We cannot sustain a democracy in which we ignore the effects of growing inequality with deficit talk or dismiss the entrenched struggle against racial and social injustices in our inner cities as an excuse for failure (Alexander, 2010; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Our stories of the promise of the American dream become part of the stories parents on the margins of economic prosperity and social well-being are compelled to tell, and their stories of struggle to achieve this dream become part of our stories, something we can no longer silence or dismiss. Our stories are intertwined and reflect a common humanity, a shared struggle. Like the parents' stories and their participation with their children in the family art and story hour shaped the counterportraits, the counterportraits continue the advocacy work of pushing these perspectives into the space of the official portrait: in policy discussions around homelessness, affordable housing and a living wage; in our conversations about students on the academic margins and their families; and in the ideological spaces of what we believe is and should be possible as fellow human beings.

APPENDIX A

"I BRAID MY MOM'S HAIR WHILE SHE READS THE BIBLE"   -BRIANNA, AGE 9

Literacy Practice	Purpose: School, Work, Leisure, Religion, Parenting, Bureaucratic Texts, Planning (some denoted as established family ritual or routine)	Observed and/or Learned about in Conversation
Reading aloud	School, Leisure, Religion, Bedtime Ritual	Observed and learned about in conversation
Bible reading	Religion and bedtime ritual	Learned about in conversation
Homework support	School, Routine	Observed and learned about in conversation
Filling out applications	School, Work, Public Assistance, Rental contracts and other Bureaucratic Texts	Observed and learned about in conversation
Language play with young children	Leisure, Parenting	Observed
Letter writing and notes between parent and child	Leisure, Parenting	Observed and learned about in conversation
Talking with young children about their drawings or paintings	Leisure	Observed and learned about in conversation
Play writing and performing	Leisure	Observed and learned about in conversation
Early writing with young children	School, Leisure, Parenting	Observed and learned about in conversation
Trips to the public library	Leisure, School, Routine	Observed and learned about in conversation
Family outings in the community (museums, school events, church)	Leisure, School, Religion	Observed and learned about in conversation
Journal writing	Leisure, Planning, Individual Routine	Observed and learned about in conversation
Book, newspaper and magazine reading	School, Work, Religion, Leisure, Parenting	Observed and learned about in conversation
Providing access to tools, materials or literacy tutoring	School, Parenting, Leisure	Observed and learned about in conversation
Playing board games,	Leisure	Observed and learned

crossword puzzles		about in conversation
Assisting young children with attempts at reading	Leisure, School, Parenting	Observed and learned about in conversation
Reading sheet music	Leisure, School	Observed and learned about in conversation
Sign language	Parenting	Observed and learned about in conversation

APPENDIX B

SHELTER FLOOR PLAN

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Describe for me a typical day in your family's life at the shelter?
2) Tell me a story about a time you noticed your child reading or writing.
3) How do you use reading and writing in your daily activities?
4) What was school like for you when you were a child?
5) Describe a memory you have of reading or writing as a child.
6) How would you describe someone who is a good reader? What makes them a good reader?
7) How has living here at the shelter changed the way your family uses reading and writing in your daily lives?
8) What do you imagine for your children as readers and writers now and in the future?

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT FAMILIES

Parent/s (age)	Children	Moved from
Kendra (27)	Mariah, 10, Makayla, 6	Chicago
Melody (late 30's)	Martez, 11, Alex, 9, Dylen, 4	Chicago
William (30) & Julissa (mid-20's)	Lawrence, 6, Darius, 4 (baby Ezme, age 7 months – not officially enrolled)	Gary, IN
Shana (mid-30's)	Mia, 11, Rhoda, 9	Chicago
Sandy (32)	Brittany, 13, Julien, 11, Brianna, 9	Chicago

APPENDIX E

CODE BOOK

Theme I: Family Literacy
Category:
    1) Literacy History (LH)
       Subcategories:
       1) literacy in school (LS)
       2) attitude toward education/school (AES)
       3) out of school literacy (LOS)
       4) inspired by a teacher (IT)
       5) struggles with literacy (SWL)
       6) good reader (GR)
       7) good writer (GW)
       8) perceptions of self as "literate" (PSL)
       9) perceptions of child as learner (PCL)
       10) love of reading (LoR)
Category:
    2) Literacy Purposes (LP)
       Subcategories:
       1) literacy for everyday (LED)
           a) sign language (SL)
           b) language play (LP)
           c) texting (Tx)
           d) bible reading (BR)
           e) written notes (WN)
           f) personal mail (PM)
           g) transportation routes (TR)
           h) schedules (SCH)
           i) notices (NOT)

       2) literacy for bureaucratic texts (LBT)
          a) job applications (JA)
          b) housing applications (HA)
          c) public assistance (PA)
          d) identification (Id)
          e) birth certificate (BC)
          f) credit reports (CR)
          g) fine print (FP)
          h) financial aid application (FAA)
          i) school registration documents (SRD)
          j) health insurance claims (HIC)
          k) school policy (SP)

l) shelter rules and policy (SRP)
m) transfer of certifications (TCER)
n) transfer of school credits (TSC)
o) voter registration (VR)
p) proof of residence (PR)

3) literacy for planning (LP)
   a) journaling (Jr)
   b) to do lists (TdL)
   c) online job searches (OJS)
   d) filling out applications (FAP)
   e) online inquiries (OIQ)

4) literacy for recreation (LR)
   a) reading for pleasure (RP)
   b) browsing magazines (BM)
   c) online games (OG)
   d) family art and story hour activities (FASHA)
   e) board games (BG)
   f) print accompanying drawings (PAD)
   g) reading sheet music (RSM)
   h) browsing online (BON)
   i) reading every day (RED)

5) literacy for distraction (LD)
   a) book reading (BR)
   b) journal writing (JW)
   c) doodling (Doo)

6) literacy for education (LE)
   a) homework (HW)
   b) studying for test (ST)
   c) research online (RO)
   d) agendas/schedules (AS)
   e) reading notes from school (RNS)
   f) reading report cards (RRC)
   g) admission requirements (ADR)
   h) transferring credits (TRC)
   i) term papers (TRMP)

Theme II: Overcoming Obstacles
Category:
   1) Sponsorship (Sp)
   Subcategories:
   1) shelter (SpSH)
      a)   put out (PO)

    b) play room (PLAR)
    c) waiting list (WL)
    d) schedule restrictions (SCHR)
    e) case manager (CM)
    f) certifications (CER)

2) school   (SpSCH)
    a) high school drop out (HSDO)
    b) caring teachers (CT)
    c) teacher expectations (TE)
    d) financial aid (FA)
    e) connection to lived reality (CLR)
    f) school abuse of power (SAP)
    g) deficit perspective of school (DPS)
    h) labels (L)
    i) full scholarship (FS)
    j) straight A student (SAS)
    k) community college (CC)
    l) passion for learning (PFL)
    m) choice (CH)
    n) help people (HP)

3) community (SpC)
    a) attitudes toward homelessness (ATH)
    b) diversity (D)
    c) race (R)
    d) entitlements (ENT)
    e) public transportation (PT)
    f) access (A)
    g) networking (NW)
    h) economic constraints (EC)
    i) careers (CAR)
    j) child care (CC)
    k) doubling up (DU)
    l) affordable living (AL)

Category:
2) "Get Yourself Together" (GYT)
    Subcategories:
    1) need for change (NFC)
        a) move to suburbs (MS)
        b) get out of neighborhood (GoN)
        c) quiet (Q)
        d) transience (Tr)
        e) "for my kids" (FMK)
        f) "more advanced" schools (MAS)

g)   different environment (DE)
h)   differences in schools (DnS)
i)   more opportunities for kids (MOK)
j)   past employment (PE)

2) learn from mistakes (LFM)
a)   teenage pregnancy (TP)
b)   get an education (GaE)
c)   "live right" (LR)
d)   get a career (GC)
e)   do better (DoB)
f)   honest living (HL)
g)   secure good jobs (SGJ)

3) independence (IND)
a)   low-income housing (LIH)

4) deficit discourse African Americans (DDAA)

5) stability (ST)
a)   get a job (GJ)
b)   find a place (FP)
c)   return to school (RtS)
d)   pay the bills (PB)
e)   take care of young children (TCYC)

6) avoid trouble (AT)

7) ownership (OWN)

8) goals (G)
a)   suspending plans (SP)
b)   need money (NM)

9) attitudes toward shelter (ATS)
a)   deficit discourse homelessness (DDH)
b)   ready to leave (RtL)
c)   wait until stable (WUS)
d)   roof overhead (ROH)

10) other shelter experiences (OSE)
a)   bed bugs (BB)
b)   overcrowded (OC)
c)   limited caseworker support (LCS)
d)   no privacy (NP)
e)   unsafe (UnS)

11) perseverance (Per)
    a) day by day (DbD)
    b) "nobody hiring" (NoH)
    c) determination (D)

Category:
   3) "Out There" (OT)
   Subcategories:
   1) violence (V)
     a) shootings (SH)
   2) the streets (TS)
     a) gang-banging (GB)
   3) negativity (N)
     a) doing nothing (DN)
     b) afraid of change (AoC)
   4) support from others (SO)
   5) despair (D)
   6) lower class (LC)
   7) bad area (BA)
     a) "Nobody's going outside" (NGO)
   8) neighborhood (N)
     a) "bad kids" (BK)
     b) neighborhood schools (NS)
     c) typical environment (TE)
   9) family relationships (FR)
     a) family history (FH)
     b) respect for family (RF)
     c) family stories (FS)
     d) separation from family (SF)
     e) abandoned as children (AaC)
   10) avoid trouble (AT)
     a) jail (J)
     b) federal prison (FP)
     c) mass incarceration (MIN)
     d) fast money (FM)
     e) fighting, drinking, smoking (STUF)
     f) drugs (Dr)
     g) young men inner city (YMIC)
     h) "drop" (DrT)
   13) struggle (Str)
     a) depression (De)
     b) loss (L)
     c) want to leave (WtL)
     d) survival (Sur)

Category:
    4) Parenting (P)
        Subcategories:
        1) parents as providers (PP)
        2) parents as hopeful (PH)
        3) parents as advocates (PA)
        4) parents as experts on their children (PEC)
        5) parents as teachers (PT)
        6) parents' description of their children (PDC)
        7) parents as role models (PRM)
        8) parents as role models for literacy (PRML)
        9) parent expectations (PE)
            a) differences between home and school (DBHS)
        10) parent aspirations (PAS)
        11) parent involvement in school (PIS)
            a) homework help (HH)
            b) attendance at events (AaE)
            c) inquiring about grades (IaG)
        12) advice from parents (AFP)
        13) parents speak back to power (PSBP)
        14) young parents (YP)
        15) teen pregnancy (TP)
        16) parenting mistakes (PM)
        17) single parents (SP)
            a) absent fathers (AF)
        18) challenges of parenting (CP)
            a) hard conversations kids (HCK)
        19) parents as protectors (Prot)
            a) don't worry kids (DWK)
        20) grandparents as teachers and advocates (GTA)

Stories:

Arrival stories (ArS)

Departure stories (DeS)

School stories (SchS)

"Out there" stories (OThS)

Parenting stories (PrS)

Overcoming Obstacles stories (OOS)

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