Increasing Pre-Service Teachers' Awareness of Children Experiencing Homelessness

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Increasing Pre-Service Teachers’ Awareness of Children Experiencing Homelessness

Using Children’s Books to Increase Pre-Service Teachers’ Awareness, Connection and Empathy Towards Children Experiencing Homelessness

Homelessness is a growing issue in the United States. During the 2020-2021 school year, almost 1.1 million students were reported homeless (National Center on Homeless Education [NCHE], 2023). According to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2015), students experiencing homelessness do not have stable and sufficient nighttime housing. Students experiencing homelessness may exhibit a myriad of academic, emotional, behavioral, and social challenges. They typically score significantly lower on standardized tests than their housed peers (Obradović et al., 2009), and repeat grades more frequently (Rafferty et al., 2004). Housing instability and low income often result in high mobility. Students who are highly mobile may change schools frequently. Each move creates barriers to attendance, such as inability to enroll or lack of transportation, which often lead to chronic absenteeism (Aratani, 2009; Institute for Child Health Policy [ICHP], 2015). In addition, these frequent moves make connecting with peers and making friends challenging (Moore & McArthur, 2011). When they do have opportunities to make friends, high rates of behavioral and emotional issues are likely to complicate the process (Koblinsky, Gordon & Anderson, 2000). Furthermore, anxiety, depression, aggression, and withdrawal are more common in children and youth experiencing homelessness (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015).

Given the impact of homelessness on children’s educational performance, we found it vital that pre-service teachers gain a better understanding of homelessness. It is common for teachers to employ a deficit perspective towards children who are experiencing homelessness (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011). Further, they may also display less commitment to students they believe will not be in their classrooms for an extended period, such as those who are highly
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mobile (Altshuler, 2003). Conversely, students experiencing homelessness value school and their teachers (Moore & McArthur, 2011). They view their teachers as important, trusted adults (Hedin, Hojer & Brunnberg, 2011). This puts teachers in the unique position to provide the stability, predictability, and support students experiencing homelessness need to be successful in school.

**Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors**

To help our pre-service teachers develop understanding and empathy towards students experiencing homelessness, we used children’s books in a pre-service special education class as a tool for building connections to text. As Bishop (1990) suggests, children’s literature has the power to build strong connections between readers and characters in a metaphor known as *mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors*. Mirrors allow readers to see themselves in literature. Windows are a means to see and learn about others. Sliding doors help to elicit change (Johnson, et al., 2017). Thus, we designed an in-class activity in which pre-service teachers read several children’s books portraying different families experiencing homelessness, with the hopes they would more clearly understand the needs of students experiencing homelessness through the lens of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. The pre-service teachers then reflected on the experience, and we followed up with a small focus group. Our goal was to determine if pre-service teachers’ perceptions of homelessness change as the result of reading children’s literature featuring characters who are homeless. Bishop’s theory, while originally designed to portray the importance of racial diversity in children’s literature (McNair & Edwards, 2021), provides an important theoretical framing for this study.

Children’s books can be a useful tool in helping pre-service teachers make deepened connections to texts, as well as providing a platform for exploring multiculturalism and diversity.
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(Isler & Dedeoglu, 2019). For our pre-service teachers to better understand homelessness, we developed discussion based around the windows, mirrors and sliding glass door metaphor. As recognized by Howrey and Whelan-Kim (2009), these types of in-depth approaches in which pre-service teachers critically examine themselves and others are recommended to help them to recognize differences in learning.

**Mirrors**

Mirrors enable readers to see themselves in books. Through literature, readers can see their lives as part of the larger human experience (Bishop, 1990). Readers tend to find connections most easily within themselves first, so a wide variety of texts is needed to make these deep connections. An important, yet often understudied, tenant of this diversity is socio-economic difference. Middle-class lifestyles are most portrayed in literature, thus creating a common narrative that is not representative of our country’s diversity. By portraying a wider variety of economic situations, we garner the power to disrupt this common narrative (Jones, 2008). As suggested by Jones and Clarke (2007), power is evident in texts and when the lived experiences of working-class and poor families are excluded, educators can play a role in writing the children back into the stories using critical discussion.

**Windows**

Books serving as windows allow the reader to experience the lives of others (Jackson, 2023; Bishop, 1990). Windows help children understand the diverse and multi-cultural world in which they live, eliminating the social isolation that emerges from reading books that reflect only an unrealistic, homogenous society. As Jackson (2023) points out, for children who live in homogenous communities, books are an important vehicle for experiencing diversity (Jackson, 2023).
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When we read books about people unlike ourselves, we are given the opportunity to also explore power relationships. “As windows, books offer a panoramic view of how power is enacted through words and images” (Botelho, 2021, p. 123). Further, books portraying windows also further broaden understanding, help facilitate rich discussion, thus creating deeper, more critical connections with texts.

**Sliding Glass Doors**

Sliding glass doors enable the reader to experience something new or be changed by the book (Bishop, 1990). Johnson (2023) shares that,

While windows provide a view into another person’s experiences based on their identities, sliding glass doors promote a change of perspective and greater understanding by inviting the readers and listeners to walk into the story and stay for a while. (p. 55)

Further, sliding glass doors can allow readers to temporarily become part of the character’s identity and can promote a change in thinking (Jackson, 2023).

Children’s literature can become “entry points to reconstruct power” (Botelho, 2021, p. 123). By engaging in scaffolded, critical conversations, teachers can help readers create new and enlightened understanding of those different from themselves. This requires readers to “walk through in their imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix.). In this study, our goal was to draw upon the power of children’s books to help our pre-service teachers make critical connections with text, with the goal of increasing knowledge and empathy of children and families experiencing homelessness.

**Building Knowledge and Fostering Empathy in Pre-Service Teachers**
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Teachers in today’s classrooms are called upon to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students, including those experiencing homelessness. Children’s books can play an important pedagogical role in supporting knowledge building for pre-service teachers.

Children living in high-risk situations, such as homelessness or high mobility, have unique and complex needs which teachers and other school personnel can address. Those needs can be categorized as affective, academic, and technical (Popp, Grant & Stronge, 2011). Affective needs revolve around emotions, motivation, and belonging, all of which can be difficult for students experiencing homelessness to access or manage. Academic needs involve appropriate and immediate assessment and how to effectively plan for student learning, especially given some students’ vast experiences in different schools and their lifestyles. Technical needs are those that involve receiving the services they need and are legally entitled to, for both the student and their family (Popp et al., 2011).

While it is encouraging to learn some teachers are well-versed in meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness, this is a less-likely scenario for pre-service teachers. Without the requisite knowledge and experience, pre-service teachers often maintain a deficit perspective and negative perceptions of students experiencing homelessness, seeing students as “dirty”, “troubled” or “broken” (Kim, 2013). They often lack the understanding and empathy to “respond to the learning needs of every child in their classrooms, whether or not they share a culture” (Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009, p. 123).

Unfortunately, students experiencing homelessness in classrooms across the country rarely share this aspect of their culture with their teachers. Yet, we expect pre-service and beginning teachers to demonstrate that understanding and empathy to meet their students’ needs as soon as they step foot into a classroom. Empathy can play a significant role in how teachers
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respond to children experiencing homelessness and become a powerful tool in ensuring that the children experience success.

Warren (2017) asserts that teacher education programs can model empathy through their curriculum; when pre-service teachers build their knowledge base about other cultures, they are better positioned to understand the perspectives of others. While teacher education programs can be instrumental in helping build awareness of homelessness, most programs do not include it (Kim, 2013). One way to build awareness and empathy is by using children’s books, which is the purpose of our study.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study using recorded class discussions and focus groups, which we coded for pre-determined themes based on our theoretical framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Prior to beginning our study, we gained permission from the university’s Institutional Review Board. We provided participants with an informed consent letter and asked them to sign a privacy statement regarding any personal information discussed in class or the focus groups.

To facilitate the study, we developed an in-class activity during which participants read various children’s books featuring characters who were experiencing homelessness. We chose a variety of settings (e.g., a car, an airport, a shelter) and diverse characters (e.g., a single white father and his son, single immigrant mother and her daughter, an interracial family), while avoiding negative stereotypes about homelessness (e.g., always having dirty clothes or being lazy). We then facilitated a discussion about the books, which we describe more comprehensively in the Data Collection section.

Participants and Setting
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We conducted the study at our small, regional comprehensive university in the Northwest United States. The participants in the study were all pre-service teachers enrolled in an Introduction to Teaching Exceptional Learners class, of which the second author is the instructor. This is a general education course, required by all K-12 education majors. We conducted the same protocol for each of three classes, though for this analysis, we only used data from two of the classes (Fall 2021 and Spring 2022). The total number of participants across the two included classes was 38.

Data Collection

We structured the class by creating a jigsaw activity. Participants were seated in groups of 4-5, and each group was given a several copies of a children’s book (See Table 1; See also Authors, 2023). A volunteer read the book aloud. After reading the book, the groups rotated so new table groups were formed, and each group had one representative from the original group. In this way, each new group had one person who had read each book. Then, each group member shared about the book they read, using this prompt: “Summarize your book, including setting, characters, overall problem/issue, and solution (if there is one).” Following this discussion, we engaged participants in guided discussion about the books using the following prompts:

- How did the author represent homelessness?
- How did the book help you learn?
- How could this book be used in your future classroom?
- Was there anything else that caught your attention, made you think, or created more questions for you?

We recorded this discussion and took notes on the classroom whiteboard.

Table 1
Increasing Pre-Service Teachers’ Awareness of Children Experiencing Homelessness

Books Used for the In-Class Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title and Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A Shelter in Our Car</em></td>
<td>This book features a single mother and her elementary school aged daughter who are immigrants from Jamaica. The father has died, and the mother is unable to find work, so they live in their car. The book depicts the challenges of living in the car, while also sharing the tenacity and courage of the mother character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Gunning, 2014)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fly Away Home</em></td>
<td>In this well-known book, a white, single dad and son live in the airport, striving to blend in and not be noticed. The father works to save money for an apartment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Bunting, 1991)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Still a Family</em></td>
<td>This book tells the story of a bi-racial, two-parent family living in two different shelters. The mother and daughter cannot live in the same shelter as the father, but they still find ways to be a family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Sturgis, 2014)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Place to Stay</em></td>
<td>A single mother and daughter live in a shelter. When the daughter is sad about leaving her home, the mother uses her imagination to turn the shelter into a palace, a rocket ship, and a banquet hall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Gunti, 2019)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After class, we conducted an optional focus group with one primary follow-up question: 

*How did the in-class activities impact your perspective of homelessness?* This question drove most of the conversation in each focus group, as participants shared their thoughts and personal experiences. The first focus group (Fall 2021) included six participants, and the second (Spring 2022) included four. We again recorded the discussions with participants’ permission.

Data Analysis

We used a deductive coding scheme (Patton, 2002) using the pre-determined codes noted in the theoretical framework: *Mirrors, Windows,* and *Sliding Glass Doors.* Using this methodology, we see codes and themes as mutually exclusive. Table 2 includes definitions of the codes we used, based on Bishop’s (1990) work:

Table 2

*Coding Schemes*
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td>Reader makes a personal connection to their own life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Window</td>
<td>Reader can view the lives of people other than their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sliding Glass Door</td>
<td>Reader is transported into the lives of others, but also experiences empathy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the Deedose Software program, we used an interrater coding procedure to identify participant comments that fit the themes.

**Results**

From our deductive analysis, we were able to identify multiple examples of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors across the data. Mirrors are connections to texts that emulate the lives of self, windows open new perspectives on others, and sliding glass doors are those which create empathy.

**Mirrors**

An interesting, and somewhat unexpected finding was that the books for many of our pre-service teachers were mirrors. Several of them deeply related to experiences of poverty and some even experienced homelessness at various points of their lives. Another common experience was knowing someone who had been homeless or had been in poverty. This sometimes occurred through their experiences working in classrooms or, for some of the pre-service teachers, hearing stories from their parents who were teachers.

Experiences of homelessness varied. One participant described in-depth her experience living as a homeless youth as the result of her parents’ divorce combined with her mother’s struggle with mental illness. She stated,

My mom was bipolar. And so that’s why we moved. Like she would get in her
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thing and we would move, out of anger. And so there were many times where

I would live in one place for like a day and we’d move. And she would get money
from places for us to move, like churches.

Another theme is that although some participants had not experienced homelessness, they
had experienced food insecurity or poverty. Some of the poverty occurred due to family
situations, and other times, it was due to being a low-income college student. In this first
example, the participant shared how she relied on the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP)
benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated, “during the pandemic, they did up SNAP
benefits that a person without many people in that household can get every month. And that
definitely helped me out. I’m not going to lie.” Another participant shared a story about how she
had unexpectedly found herself fostering her younger cousins and had difficulties applying for
SNAP benefits. She recalled,

A few years ago, I ended up fostering my younger cousins. They were like four and seven
at the time. And I was in school one day and all of a sudden, I got out of the class and
they're like, “hey we need you to take these kids.” So, then I'm trying to get SNAP. I'm
like, I don't know, 20-something but trying to get SNAP. So standing in line to get those
and... I got there at noon, and they're like nope come back tomorrow. Get there the next
day. You got there at like nine o'clock, they're like nope not early enough. But I couldn't
hardly qualify for half of these because they didn't like that I was in school or something
like this. And then I made too much money. I was not making a lot of money and I think I
got like 100 bucks a month. And then I couldn't—I didn't qualify for foster money
because they're my family.
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Some participants also experienced mirrors via their participation in the community. For example, some made connections from experiences of their parents who were teachers. Others recognized challenges in the community, such as inadequate public transportation. For example, one student shared about her mom’s experience as a teacher. “She (mom) taught at a low-income school so a lot of the moms were waitresses or single parents and it's like what do waitresses work? They work evenings, so it's when do you meet this Mom, right?”

Windows

Windows connections occur when a reader connects to a character or experience outside of themselves, forming a deep connection to the characters. Although window connections were less prevalent than mirrors and doors, participants made several key window connections. One of the more common themes was that the books presented examples of homeless situations that do not fit a stereotype.

In this first example, the participant identified several examples of different types of homelessness. Her view of homelessness is broadened, and a deepened understanding occurs.

Just the different levels of homelessness, that often we associate someone standing on the side of the road with a sign. But there’s many different levels, especially in this book…. Kind of the different levels that it can take because she was going to school… And that people choose different things, and this particular family chose not to stay in the shelter, they chose to make their shelter their car instead.

In this second instance, the participant is more deeply connected to the character, and is beginning to recognize the emotional toll of being homeless.

It really expressed the feelings of invisibility as dealing with homelessness.
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And knowing that you're trying towards a goal but realizing that maintaining a sense of structure in your life you have to maintain this outward appearance. Like wearing their same set of clothes could go unnoticed in an airport in order to continue living there. And just kind of like being realistic with it and like the conclusion of the story being eventually we'll be able to move out of this situation but that time's not now.

In this example, we are beginning to see change in perspective, although not at the level of empathy yet.

**Sliding Glass Doors**

A sliding glass door meant that participants were able to build empathy through the experiences of others. In many cases, we witnessed a change in student understanding that emerged from at first possessing a more stereotypical, even at times judgmental view of homelessness to a much more empathetic and understanding viewpoint. In this first instance, the student explained how the books changed their perspective about the causes of homelessness. In this case, the student’s view was a sliding glass door in that she recognized that homeless people are often looking for jobs.

I think it really helped me learn that people are actually really trying to find jobs and stuff even though they don't have one right now. Because sometimes, there's people you hear that like, “Oh they need to go get a job.” But some of them are actually trying to get a job, you just don't always understand that.

Another student was able to put themselves in the place of others, making it clear they were feeling much more empathy.
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A lot of who you are as a person comes out of the first part of your life, like your parents providing for you and taking care of you. And... these kids who we're talking about that are second and third graders that are homeless. And first off what is their relationship with their parents? How does that make their poor parents feel that they can’t do the bare minimum? Like can't provide them a roof over their head; can’t provide them with every single meal?

Finally, some participants not only discovered sliding glass doors, but they began to engage in a process of critical literacy, examining their own privilege. We observed a shift in understanding the causes of homelessness. At first participants were quick to ascribe personal traits of laziness or being uninterested in securing housing, but consequently developed a more robust and deeper understanding of societal causes of homeless. The conversation emerged into a discussion about privilege.

We talked about privilege. Like in this group we talked about how privileged a lot of us grew up, and I'm not saying everybody, but at this table we were and we didn't have to think about our next meal. But bringing that awareness to your future students of maybe the kid sitting next to you is staying in a shelter and you need to be cautious of that.

In looking at each of the three metaphorical connections to books, it was clear that our participants deeply connected to the concept of homelessness using picture books. Books provided a powerful connections experience by providing a platform for critical discussion and reflection. Moreover, they provided a significant lens for us as their professors into their lives.

Discussion
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Empathy is defined by Broomhead (2013) as “a feeling, due to the involvement of understanding, reflection, imagination, compassion, but may lead to an action in response to the disclosure” (p. 174). With this deepened understanding and empathy regarding homelessness, we discovered another key finding. By building these connections with text, pre-service teachers felt called to action. In many of our discussions, participants brought up injustices happening in our community and schools and ways to potentially solve them. For example, one student commented on how the public bus system in our community was cumbersome to use, sharing that in another close-by city, the public bus was not only free, but it ran until 2 a.m. on weekends. Another example was that pre-service teachers were very concerned that in some shelters, families were broken up, as indicated by this comment: “Wow, it's really messed up that the dad can't be with the kid and a mom.” Excerpts like this demonstrate the pre-service teachers are beginning to show deepened empathy and critical literacy by developing potential solutions.

Warren (2017) states that empathy in teacher education serves two functions: teacher candidates can begin to notice patterns in their own beliefs, and it can help teacher candidates apply empathy to profession. Through our in-class activities, we found multiple evidence that pre-service teachers were able to notice patterns in their beliefs systems and were challenged by what they read. Our findings are consistent with Powers-Costello and Swick’s (2011) findings that suggest intentional instructional activities can change pre-service teachers’ perceptions about homelessness. Specifically, they noted a change in perception of the causes of homelessness, and the dynamics of people’s lives who are experiencing homelessness, resulting from classroom activities. When pre-service teachers were afforded sliding glass door experiences, we noticed a similar outcome. They had a deepened and more accurate understanding of what it is like to be homeless. In this final quote, we see this deepened understanding demonstrated:
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You don't take into consideration the kids that can grow up in it. So to me this was all kind of new and my heart was kind of aching for these families.

But it kind of just hit me hard because I've never even heard about it.

It is our hope that this deepened understanding will result in more impactful experiences with our pre-service teachers’ students, as the literature is also clear that teachers have the power to make profound differences in the lives of students experiencing homelessness (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008; Swick, 2000).

**Implications**

Effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students meet affective needs by caring for and interacting with students, being fair and respectful, being enthusiastic and motivating, having a positive attitude toward teaching, and being reflective practitioners about their decision making relevant to their students’ cultures and lived experiences (Popp et al., 2011). Building empathy can be a cornerstone of further facilitating relationships in the K-12 setting. Warren (2017) shares that empathy is an important tool in guiding professional decision making. As we know that the teacher plays such a vital role in the lives of children experiencing homelessness, empathy is an important beginning. Children’s books elicit the power to help facilitate this empathy building, and therefore are a useful tool in helping pre-service teachers make connections using their windows, doors and mirrors. Considering current legislation limiting the types of books schools can use, we still want to emphasize the importance of making connections through literature. Jackson (2023, p. 61) states, “What is the point of 21st century learning if we are not exposing our students to the world in which they live?”

Books from dominant social groups are still most prevalent in classroom libraries (Jones, 2008), which can disadvantage students from non-dominant groups. As Bishop (1990) states,
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“Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds” (p. xi). Further, as the diversity of our society grows, we need books reflecting society’s vast traditions and values (Cox & Galda, 1990). Books that feature the realities of the lived experiences of homelessness are a means to accomplishing this goal.

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**Children’s Books**

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