Dependency Served:
Rhetorical Assumptions Governing the Education
of Homeless Children and Youth
in the United States

Irving Epstein

Although it can be convincingly argued that in recent years, the legitimacy of the welfare state in the United States has been subjected to an unrelenting attack, it is clear that social policy toward homeless people, generally, and homeless children and youth, specifically, reflects larger contradictions intrinsic to the nature of that entity. It isclear that the state has an expressed interest in limiting the political and economic costs of alleviating poverty so as to protect those market forces that contribute to its creation, since those forces concurrently allow privileged elites to maintain and perpetuate their economic position. On the other hand, until recently, the state has also viewed it beneficial to claim some responsibility for reducing the effects of poverty and in so doing, communicate a sense of mission that masks its other inherently coercive policies. The contradiction has usually been resolved through protecting market forces by proposing short-term solutions that do little to threaten status quo practice (Blau 1992). While even short-term solutions are now being rejected by the political right, the justification for abandoning those in need remains the same.

As an alternative to active government involvement in social policy, the state promotes an ideology of self-reliance that implies that the homeless are to blame for the predicament they confront. Accordingly, the homeless should be held directly responsible for ameliorating their harsh living situations, and in any event, they already have adequate resources available to resolve their dilemmas. This stance serves the interests of the state quite well, for it minimizes the state's responsibility to initiate structural reform by posing the issue as one of individual competence and will.

In conceiving of the state, it is useful to examine the discursive function of its institutional components. State institutions are responsible not only for forming and implementing policies but also for legitimizing them. They consistently attempt to make the case that it is the general will rather than that of specific interests that is well served when policy formation and implementation occurs. As Bob Jessup notes:

> Any general definition of the state would need to refer to state discourse as well as
> state institutions .... The core of the state apparatus comprises a distinct ensemble of
> institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and
> enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their
> common interest or general will. (1990: 34 1)

Schools are particularly important, as they employ curricular and instructional mechanisms that reify exclusionary practices in the name of inclusivity. Following Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), the formation and dissemination of the formal curriculum contributes to the acquisition of cultural capital, whose possession is valued by privileged elites. By including and excluding certain knowledge domains deemed worthy of mastery, often according to the degree to which these domains are abstracted from common working- and lower-middle-class experience, schools promote a particular form of symbolic violence even as they present themselves as inclusive organizations.

Common socialization tendencies within the classroom further perpetuate an achievement ideology that views individual competition as intrinsically worthwhile and demands that those who do not succeed internalize their sense of failure. This ideology shields school practice from criticism and critique. As a result, individualism and self-reliance are continually reified as commonsense positive virtues. Ultimately, schools mask their own sorting and selection functions through asserting that, both in form and content, that which is taught to students is value-neutral and can stand the test of objective evaluation. As a result, schools also reinforce broader social messages concerning the limited responsibility all mechanisms of the state possess to minimize social inequality.

An analysis of how schools teach children who are homeless as well as how they teach about homelessness is useful. Homelessness and street life share important features that often directly challenge those mainstreamed values enunciated in school settings. For example, life on the street usually demands public disclosure of personal destitution. One's poverty is made so visible that there is no escape from confronting its existence for the external observer as well as victim. One's uniqueness becomes difficult to mask. Second, survival on the street necessitates the abandonment of a futuristic time orientation as survival becomes a moment-to-moment preoccupation. For those in such a situation, the ability to divide and order time so as to contemplate, let alone plan for, a future is an unfamiliar luxury. Third, street life demands ceding one's entitlement to personal and private space. As a result, trust in the ability to achieve a sense of permanence regarding personal and social relationships is easily compromised.

Schools, as rule-governing institutions that promote the virtues of individual achievement, acquired through competition for the delayed gratification of receiving good grades, find it difficult to address these cultural characteristics unique to homelessness. To be sure, part of the mandate of compulsory schooling is to provide an inclusive education for all children while addressing their specific needs. Truancy and poor school attendance, behaviors that can be logically associated with homelessness, communicate a form of resistance that directly threatens that mandate (Enomoto 1994). Indeed, the clash of values that occurs between generic classroom expectations and negative educational experiences encountered by generations of children and parents in poverty makes the decision to drop out a logical resolution of such conflict (Okey and Cusik 1995). Of course, homelessness represents a particular form of destitution whose effects are sudden, comprehensive, and immediate. The intensive monitoring of personal and social relations within classroom environments and the enforcement of general rules of behavior for all students regardless of their background present a stark contrast to life on the streets or in shelters, where one's survival demands more flexible and immediate responses to life-threatening situations. The curricular and instructional practices that schools employ to teach to and about homeless youth are therefore of interest, not only because they reiterate mainstream educational values in a specific context but also because they define the limits upon which those values maintain their salience in particularly tragic circumstances.

HOMELESSNESS AS A CATEGORY OF "AT-RISK" BEHAVIOR

Homeless children and youth are often characterized by educators as *at-risk students*. The term is borrowed from a medical metaphor, whereby it is assumed that potential illness can be identified and treated in preventive fashion, before being allowed to fester fully. Through analogy, it is argued that by successfully addressing the needs of at-risk students, long-term harmful behaviors such as dropout, delinquency, and criminal activity can also be prevented. It is important to note that when applied to homelessness, the term *at-risk* is quite ambiguously defined to include cognitive and motor function and development, psychosocial and emotional development, and socioeconomic circumstance, as well as particular learned behaviors judged to be unhealthy. The attributes associated with children and youth reiterate this pattern. At the same time, as Gartner and Lipsky note:

The medical model views disability as located within the individual, and, thus, primary emphasis is devoted to the etiology or causes of conditions and the placement of persons in separate diagnostic categories. From this perspective, efforts to improve the functional capabilities of individuals are regarded as the exclusive solution to disability. (1987: 390, n.6)

Natriello and his colleagues argue that the at-risk term evolved from cultural deprivation and cultural deficit models. The advantage to its use lay in the assumption that educational as well as environmental factors including the quality of community and family relationships shared equal responsibility for guaranteeing a student's future school success or failure. In addition, the ability to identify, early on, those who were in potential harm could prove beneficial in preventing later dysfunction (Natriello et al. 1990). Its use within the context of homelessness shows few of these potential advantages, though. Unlike specific special education designations (communicative disorder, visual or auditory impairment, for example) that at least pay a half-hearted attempt formally to define disabilities with a certain degree of specificity, the nature of homelessness is so global as to make the term easily susceptible to blanket stigmatization. And the fact that children are viewed as sharing the unfortunate condition with their parents is likely to result in the gross labeling of both parties in pejorative terms. There simply is no reason for educators to make a shared commitment with community members and parents to alleviate its negative effects if those parties are characterized as sharing the inherently dysfunctional attributes associated with their children and can therefore be held directly responsible for their perpetuation.

In analyzing the assumptions that form the basis for our impressions of homelessness and its effect upon children and youth, it is clear that functionalist principles of cognitive and psychosocial development are continually reinforced. Those assumptions view development as unilaterally progressive, deterministic, generalizable, and decontextualized. Historically, these assumptions, when applied to curricular issues, justified the move toward increasing reliance upon social control, bureaucratic hierarchy, and efficiency within school walls (Popkewitz 1987). But their effect upon perceptions of homeless children has been quite specific. It is widely assumed that the characteristics homeless children exhibit separate them from the norm. If these characteristics are addressed successfully, then students presumably reacquire normalcy. If unsuccessfully addressed, then their exceptionality legitimizes further exclusionary practices and policies, since there is a real danger of those difficulties becoming permanently disabling.

As is true of the at-risk label generally, the homeless label serves as a social marker, defining normalcy for the majority population, rather than enhancing our understanding of a group in need. But in the case of homeless children, the at-risk label can be even more pernicious. Not only is the courage and strength that many of these children display minimized, but their inventive use of survival strategies, their enhanced flexibility in making quick decisions, their heightened awareness of external threats and influences, and their willingness to take risks are all deprecated. Instead, it is their dependency that is stressed.

THE AMBIGUITY OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

It is not surprising that ambivalent policy leads to ambiguous practice. Several years after the passage of the McKinney Act, Maria Yon surveyed 184 school districts regarding homeless students. Of the 101 districts (55 percent of the sample) that responded, 69 percent of the reporting districts described the number of homeless children within their boundaries as being nonexistent or of small size. Forty-eight percent reported that they had not made any plans to educate homeless children, and of the 52 percent who made such plans, only 7 percent received grants for the expressed purpose of educating them. While 22 percent of those districts that acknowledged homelessness to be a problem offered in-service training to their teachers, only one district actually provided a course on the topic for their staff. Yon concluded that homelessness is more likely to be perceived to be a significant problem among larger, rather than smaller, districts, but the growing problem of hidden homelessness, which probably affects districts of all sizes, remains unaddressed (Yon 1995).

Given this degree of general institutional ambivalence, it is not surprising that curricular and instructional policies at the local level are ambiguous and contradictory. Educators are asked to participate in practices that both identify and ignore situations related to homelessness, empathize with as well as objectify conditions of homelessness, and assimilate as well as separate homeless children from the normal school population.

IGNORANCE/IDENTIFICATION

One of the major complaints of school districts involves the difficulties their staff confront in obtaining adequate records of transient population groups such as homeless children. How does one secure and evaluate their previous academic records? At what level should they be placed? In what areas are they in need of remediation or special assistance, if any? Have they been fully immunized and do they suffer from specific health problems that warrant immediate attention before entering school premises? And, in the absence of such information, what can one expect schools to reasonably do in offering assistance to homeless children? As has been noted, the McKinney Act both places pressure upon school districts to keep and maintain adequate records and yet asks that their personnel implement policies flexibly, so that the absence of specific information does not become an impediment to the delivery of appropriate educational services.

Discovering appropriate answers to these questions is made even more difficult because of the potential harm that can result regardless of the specific solution that is employed. We are acutely aware of the negative effects of labeling that result from an insensitive reliance upon school records, particularly those that are constructed anecdotally. Yet anecdotal information is the first type and in some ways the most crucial of the information that will be gathered when a homeless student is initially placed in a new school, as it allows educators to contextualize other raw data that usually arrives later. At the same time, the willingness to ignore homeless student needs in the absence of available information is a serious danger that is also present. Of course, of greater importance than the type, quality, or quantity of information gathered about homeless children is how that information is used or misused. But given the general tendency of school districts to ignore the existence of the homelessness, one can reasonably question the contention that it is inadequate record keeping and inaccessibility to background information that are the primary reasons for the failure of schools to address the needs of these children.

EMPATHY/OBJECTIFICATION

To the extent that staff and teacher in-servicing does occur, it focuses upon enhancing general awareness of homelessness as a social phenomenon. That awareness is reinforced through offering information about its prevalence and its effects upon student behavior and performance, and providing the names and addresses of neighborhood shelters and/or social service agencies that might offer assistance to the children and their families. Such understanding, however, is rarely translated into unique instructional classroom practice.

The Massachusetts Department of Education, for example, has created a specific unit responsible for providing educational services for homeless children and youth within the state. Of the five issues its in-service workshop on homeless children attempts to address, only one directly involves instruction, "Ways school personnel can support children during this time of transition [What specific strategies can teachers, counselors, and administrators implement to overcome barriers homeless children face as they attempt to stay and succeed in school?] " (Douglas 1992). The fact that classroom instructional strategies are linked with those addressed by counselors and administrators reflects the lack of instructional focus directed toward the issue.

Indeed, among the six priorities the U.S. Department of Education lists for educators as meeting the specific needs of homeless children and youth (remediation and tutoring; support services including social work and counseling; after-school and extended day services; awareness training for personnel; assessment, screening, and placement; and program continuity and stability), not one directly involves special classroom instruction (Heflin and Rudy 1991). These responses create what I can an appeal to empathy based upon objectification. It is assumed that a global, objectified awareness of homelessness will lead to increased staff and instructor sensitivity that will further expedite the development of coping skills for children who are adversely affected.

Why is it assumed that once such awareness is enhanced, progressive action on the part of teachers and school officials will necessarily follow? There is the presumption that empathy, resulting from this heightened understanding, will create the motivation that is a prerequisite for further action. But, as long as specific instructional responses are generically defined in the most global of terms (tutoring, remediation, after-school servicing), the framing of policy toward homeless children

allows those school personnel responsible for implementing policy to distance themselves from the specific needs of the children. Cognizance of the objective conditions of homelessness may legitimize empathetic attitudes, but it does little to guarantee concrete responses. As a result, the prerogative for action is defined in conditional terms. The message that is being sent communicates the view that one should respond to the needs of homeless children in such and such a way, rather than that one is responsible and will be held directly accountable for enacting a set of concrete policies that are designed to produce beneficial results.

Andy Hargreaves has commented upon the role of persecutory and depressive guilt that teachers experience. Persecutory guilt occurs when one fails to comply with bureaucratic controls and accountability standards. Depressive guilt occurs with the realization that through neglect or inattention, we inflict harm upon those for whom we care (1994). The failure to create instructional approaches designed specifically for homeless children obviously enhances feelings that exacerbate both forms of guilt on the part of teachers.

ASSIMILATION/SEPARATION

The range of policy options created to address issues affecting homeless youth incorporate both assimilationist and separationist strategies, even though the McKinney Act specifically argues in favor of an assimilationist perspective. In a few large school districts, for example, specific facilities have been specially designated as schools for homeless children. All of the children within district boundaries who are homeless will attend the designated schools, often established within a shelter or near shelter premises.

But if this type of policy invokes separation at its most extreme, other approaches are in evidence too. The identification of a single staff member as coordinator of services for homeless children within the regular school complies with the intent of the McKinney Act but also defines responsibility in individual and separate, rather than collective and shared terms. This is the case in New York City, where under the Fair Share system no one school is given responsibility for the education of homeless children, but one staff person per school is appointed as a homeless advocate (U.S. Department of Education 1992).

With respect to classroom instruction and practice, assimilationist tendencies are more popular. Teachers are encouraged to use a buddy system for homeless students, so that a peer will give needed attention to the newly enrolled student. However, it is also recognized that such a system should be established for all new students, regardless of whether they are homeless. The creation of after-school tutoring and extracurricular activities on school premises as well as within shelters is widely applauded, particularly for adolescents in need of GED training and vocational counseling. Yet it is acknowledged that such services should be made available for all interested students, not simply those who are homeless.

We have already noted that the placement of homeless children in special education programs, generically designed for those who are "at risk," may have separationist outcomes, but its implementation is conducted in assimilationist terms, where little distinction is made between homeless as opposed to nonhomeless special education students. There is little specific guidance that is offered to educators that would encourage decision making based upon the children's best interests, since those interests are rarely recognized as being unique.

Staff connections between the disparate environments of shelter and school are initiated in a number of ways. As has been noted, some schools employ social workers who will work directly with homeless children and their families on the school site; occasionally guidance counselors and school personnel will visit the shelters themselves. There are some classroom teachers who will both teach in or visit shelters on a regular basis, although their numbers are less prevalent. Among the most successful programs to receive national publicity is the KOOL-IS (Kids Organized on Learning in School) initiative established at the Benjamin Franklin Day Elementary School in Seattle. The Program uses teachers, volunteers, homeless parents, corporate, church, and community sponsorship, and professional case workers to serve the needs of its students, of whom a disproportionate number are homeless. Its success is a testament to the power of networking and the potential effectiveness of caring, intelligent, and energetic school administrators, such as Carole Williams, the school principal described by Sharon Quint (1994).

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

After-school and shelter tutoring are important activities that supplement formal instruction within schools. Model programs, such as those implemented in Seattle, create student assistance teams that offer students transitional assistance, troubleshoot, and coordinate tutorial services and individual plans of action for children and their families. Student assistance teams consist of eight members including the school principal, case manager, family support worker, school psychologist, the school's coordinator of volunteer services, a volunteer worker, a tutor, and a program coordinator, who meet once a week to review their clients' progress. A program with similar intent in Madison, Wisconsin, the Transitional Education Program, provides the same services: counseling, school and personal supplies, and food, to both children and their parents. In New York City, the board of education has initiated a program titled "Students Living in Temporary Housing," where family assistants provide educational programs for parents and children at shelters, while social workers and guidance counselors are used as complementary staff. For older children, Career Education Centers have been established to work with adolescent homeless at 25 shelters, creating educational programs at each site. These programs include academic instruction, counseling services, and enrichment activities that consist of networking with community arts groups, business partnerships that give financial aid to students, and general mentoring. Together, these programs emphasize the importance of using a holistic approach to attack the effects of homelessness (U.S. Department of Education 1992).

Yet there are pervasive policies and structural decisions that limit the potential impact of educational efforts within shelter walls. In the first place, most shelters restrict the clientele they serve. It is obvious that large numbers of homeless children do not have their educational needs served as a result of their direct or indirect association with parents who fail to meet shelter selection criteria or, in certain cases, their own adolescence.

A second set of policies involves length of stay and conditions of residence. Seventy-five percent of all shelters place restrictions upon one's length of stay; most require residents to sign contractual agreements enunciating shelter rules and responsibilities that may include compulsory parent education and counseling sessions, housekeeping chores, prohibitions against vulgar language use, alcohol and drug use, and the physical disciplining of one's children, and so forth (Weinreb and Rossi 1995). Children whose parents fail to comply with these restrictions are obviously adversely affected. Although shelters provide many services to their clients, they are more likely to assess the needs of adults, rather than children, and while they report high percentages of children with learning, behavioral, physical, and developmental problems, only about 50 percent of the shelters surveyed in the Weinreb and Rossi study offer specific assessments of children's needs in these areas (1995).

Restrictive selection criteria, limited lengths of stay, and an insistence upon operating potentially stigmatizing parent education programs are indicative of the pervasive degree of institutional mistrust that accompanies aid to the homeless within shelter environments. An unwritten message that seems quite clear is that the quantity and quality of such assistance must never be perceived by their clients as being so high so as to foster their dependency or compromise their ability to make a commitment to individual self-reliance. As a result, the smell of coercion, even if communicated informally, becomes an intrinsic part of the shelter experience. Therefore, the potential success of educational programs that operate within such an environment must be viewed with a certain degree of skepticism.

There are success stories, though. One is the Jump Start program created by The Homes for Homeless (HFH) organization. It utilizes a variation of the *High/Scope* curriculum, a reading program for preschool students that encourages direct student participation and involvement in the selection of appropriate instructional activities. HFH also developed the Brownstone School, an after-school program offering accelerated, rather than remedial, instruction to elementary students aged 5-13 (Nuñez 1994). Its activities are discussed more fully in Nuñez's chapter in this volume.

Efforts to motivate children through encouraging their engagement with empowering activities would seem to stand out given the typical shelter environment to which many are accustomed. Nonetheless, that environment will always differ significantly from that of the classroom due to the continued turnover of its population, severely overcrowded living conditions, and, in large transitional shelters, overt surveillance of client activities and a direct dependence upon the threat of coercion so as to ensure the physical protection of clients.

CONCLUSION: WHOSE DEPENDENCY?

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that educational policy and practice reflect the ideological ambivalence of the reluctant welfare state, which is unwilling to address directly issues of homelessness lest the short-term interests of those who are privileged be compromised. Yet the state is equally unwilling to admit to the coercive implications of such a stance. When educational efforts are forthcoming, they fail to speak directly to the unique characteristics of the culture of homelessness. Instead, educators are encouraged to rely upon global "at-risk" categorizations as they design their courses of action. Educators are given contradictory messages with respect to the amount of background information that should be used in making instructional decisions, the extent to which they are responsible for creating specific instructional and curricular initiatives that directly speak to the needs of homeless children, and the degree to which homeless children and youth should be segregated from or assimilated into mainstream groups.

In spite of some outstanding efforts on the part of selected educators to go beyond school walls and directly confront issues affecting homeless children who reside within shelters or on the streets, comprehensive action of this sort is the exception, rather than the norm. Instead, it is the generic tutorial, remedial, and special-education program that is most often utilized; the effect is one of treating homelessness as one of the many types of disability with which we are more familiar. Coupled with a lack of understanding of the uniqueness of the culture of the street and the institutional culture of the shelter is the tendency to objectify homeless children and youth into the roles of psychological and socioeconomic dependents.

Given the role schools have traditionally played in legitimizing the contradictions of the reluctant welfare state, these responses are not surprising. They are made even more understandable when one recognizes the fact that the culture of homelessness is more diametrically opposed to the culture of the school than those typical social class differences with which we are more familiar. Nonetheless, in equating homelessness with generic dependency and at-risk behavior, while maintaining adherence to an achievement ideology with its claims of inclusivity in the midst of exclusionary practice, schools express their own form of ideological dependency. This dependency is fostered by an unwillingness of a middle class to admit directly to the existence of class conflict and confront its own fears of facing potential homelessness. Given such a climate, the curricular and instructional activities that are utilized by caring and dedicated educators are even more remarkable, although it is difficult to conclude that they will ever become widespread. In acknowledging the presence of social pressures that limit the range of options available to those engaged in curricular and instructional practice, we are able to obtain a clearer perspective regarding the limitations and possibilities for curricular change and reform on a broader scale. If the treatment of homelessness is indicative, then those possibilities are indeed circumscribed.

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