FROM THE STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE: A NARRATIVE REPORT OF WHAT URBAN HOMELESS STUDENTS NEED FROM SCHOOLS

A Dissertation by

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FROM THE STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE: A NARRATIVE REPORT OF WHAT URBAN HOMELESS STUDENTS NEED FROM SCHOOLS

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DEDICATION

To my husband, three children, three grandchildren, and my parents
Where are you from?
they asked the girl,
found homeless and alone.
I come from a place, I've never lived --
a place that I call home.
It's where my heart once landed
and has never lost its way.
It is the place where I belong,
and will return one day.
And when I do I'll never leave,
I'll let my roots grow deep.
I'll rest beside her river,
she'll sing my heart to sleep.
She'll sing a song that washes all
the other years away -- a song that
lets my heart be still
and hear the mountains pray … Anonymous
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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry sought to understand from the homeless students’ perspective the meaning of home, how homelessness affects schooling, what homeless students need from school, and whether or not policy and law are meeting the needs of homeless students. The four stories told by these homeless adolescents are unique; and yet, similar themes emerged relating to the experiences and challenges they face being homeless, in a shelter environment, and attending public schools. The theoretical perspective of ecological systems theory and the narrative inquiry approach provided the foundation for this study. The four adolescents provided unique and insightful descriptions of the homeless experience despite differing interpretations from society of the meaning of home and what homeless students need from schools.

It was concluded that homeless students defined home from a relational aspect instead of just a structure or dwelling place. Homeless students identified challenges regarding schooling, based on shelter conditions, rules, and family, but were supported by provisions as set forth in policy and law. The existence of positive relationships was a significant factor in the successful transitions between home and school.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is one austere phenomenon facing America today. Homelessness affects millions of people yearly. The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) found that in a twelve-month sheltered homeless count, approximately 1.42 million people spent at least one night homeless (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013) (HUD). The report also stated that while the sheltered homeless count stayed relatively stable this past year, the number of unsheltered homeless decreased by seven percent. Additional data collected annually and specifically on one single night, or Point-in-Time (PIT), represented a yearly snapshot taken in late January of both sheltered and unsheltered homeless. The national data collected reflects the seriousness of homelessness, but given the mobility of homeless people, it is difficult to capture a precise count. The PIT only represents an approximation of the numbers. National estimates of homelessness included in the 2013 AHAR further stated that of the 610,042 people who were homeless on any one given night,

.... roughly two-thirds, or 65%, of homeless people were sheltered, sleeping in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, or safe havens. The other 35% were unsheltered: sleeping on the streets, in their cars, at parks, in abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, airports, camping grounds, or in another location not meant for human habitation.

The national estimation on homelessness provides the big picture of this crisis, however current data also highlights homelessness by household type, such as homeless people in families.
Homeless People in Families

Homeless demographics over time have shifted from being primarily individuals to increased numbers of households, or people in families. A homeless household, or family, is characteristically defined as having at least one adult and one child. The 2013 AHAR stated that on a single night in January 2013, homeless people in families accounted for 36% of all homeless people and people in families comprised nearly 50% of the total sheltered homeless population. The number of sheltered people in families has increased by three-tenths of a percent while the number of unsheltered people in families has decreased by 37%. The report further stated that 58% of all homeless people in families were under the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013, p. 22). While sheltered people in families have gradually declined, the number of unsheltered children and youth experiencing homelessness has increased.

Homeless Children and Youth

Homeless children and youth comprise one of the largest growing homeless population subgroups in the United States. Homeless children and youth can either be with an adult or they can be considered unaccompanied, meaning without an adult. For the first time, communities are submitting PIT estimates of homelessness in three age categories: under 18, 18 to 24, and 25 years old and older. There were nearly 200,000 homeless children and youth on a single night in January 2013, equal to about one-third of all homeless people. The report further stated that most homeless children and youth under 18 were most likely part of a homeless sheltered family then youth between 18 and 24 who were unaccompanied, or without an adult (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013, p. 46). These homeless children and youth attend school and the current conditions of being homeless create challenges for public schools.
Homelessness and the Public Schools

Homeless children and youth are one subgroup that affects U.S. public schools. The statistical data on the growing ranks of children and youth experiencing homelessness is one way to understand the affect homelessness has on public schools. Each year school districts report on the number of homeless children enrolled in their schools. Of all the public schools reporting homeless data to the U.S. Department of Education for the 2011-2012 school year, there were 1,168,354 homeless children and youth enrolled in U.S. public schools, a 10% increase from the 2010-2011 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2014). According to Coker, et al. (2009) “in a classroom of 28 students, 2 students will be homeless at some point in their lives” (p. 1451). The data on homeless children and youth suggests this subgroup will continue to increase in homeless count, and this can influence how public schools meet the educational needs of homeless children. However, data alone can only present a numerical picture of homelessness.

Data is important to understand trends in homelessness, but it does not provide an understanding to the concept of homelessness. Homelessness is a multidimensional social problem with multiple definitions. Defining homelessness in both denotative and connotative terms is important to this study.

Defining Homelessness

Homelessness is a multifaceted concept because of the social interactions and constructions related to the term. There is little consensus to defining homelessness and complexity issues are amplified between researchers and policy makers. “There is no standard or uniform definition of homelessness that has been agreed on by researchers or policy makers” (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006, p. 289). The denotative definition of homelessness used
by a variety of professionals is the interpretation of where a person stays at night. While the 
connotative definition includes a much broader perspective of interpreting what homeless 
persons are missing. One viewpoint rarely examined is the notion of home from the homeless 
person’s perspective. Homeless people have a unique perspective that can lend insight to the 
experience of homelessness and provide a framework towards an intimate definition of home.

Home is a concept that is important to human, social, and psychological development. In 
anthropology, home is a theme in the study of humankind. In literature, ‘going home’ is a 
universal theme as in *Odysseus*, *Moby Dick*, or *Huckleberry Finn*. In psychology, home is 
defined as a dwelling place. Rossi (1994) noted, “there are few words in English that are richer 
in positive meaning than ‘home’. The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes more than three pages 
to home and its derivatives” (p. 342). The denotative definition of home evokes a multitude of 
concepts, including residence, family group, birthplace, native habitat, place of origin, 
headquarters, safe place, dwelling, abode, quarters, and domicile. However, the connotative 
term, or notion of home, can imply more than just physical space. It can imply a sense of 
belonging or community.

For homeless individuals, the term “homeless” can evoke emotions directed to closeness, 
understanding, relationship, confidence, love, and kin. Pascale (2005) premised, “homelessness 
no longer conveys a sense of home lost, but rather a lack of place and a lack of home or 
community to which to return” (p. 259). Home is not just individuals sharing a house; it is a 
community where individuals share a common feeling of belonging. Finley and Diversi (2010) 
stated in their report, “we have so enshrined the notion of home as being a manifestation of 
personal ownership, ignoring the possibility that home is also a symbol for the spiritual essence
of belonging” (p. 9). The notion of home encompasses not only the dwelling place, but also a sense of community.

People who are homeless often lose contact with people who care; they lose the connection to a community. Pascale (2005) reported, “a home is not so much a physical space as it is a rhetorical space of community and belonging” (p. 259). Homeless people want connections that represent they belong to a community. Finley and Diversi (2010) noted homeless people all share the desire to have a home formed with love and in association with others. Home has multiple dimensions that lend insight into how homeless persons navigate their thoughts and emotions of what it means to belong or connect to a community. This study will examine both the denotative and connotative definitions of homelessness from the homeless student’s perspective.

**Problem Statement**

Homelessness is a national issue, difficult to measure, and the number of children experiencing homelessness is increasing. Homelessness is not an easy existence on any person, but it is extremely difficult on children. The National Center on Family Homelessness reported in *America’s Youngest Outcasts 2010*, “children experiencing homelessness have gradually become a prominent part of a Third World that is emerging within our own nation” (Bassuk, Murphy, Thompson Coupe, Kenney, & Beach, 2011, p. 8). Homelessness as a life choice is rarely something children can control. Instead, there are economic reasons for families experiencing homelessness; such as poverty, residential instability, loss of job, reduced hours or pay cut (Pew Research Center, 2010; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2013). The poverty level in the United States is the leading risk factor commonly associated with homelessness and affecting millions of children.
In 2012, 46.5 million U.S. citizens were living in poverty, up from 46.2 million in 2011 (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2013). For children under the age of 18, the poverty rate increased from 15.5 million to 16.4 million, accounting for 35.5% of people in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith, & United States Census Bureau, 2011). Poverty is the leading cause of homelessness for families with children followed by affordable housing and unemployment (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2013). According to Miller (2011a) of the homeless children living at the poverty line in 2009, at least 1 out of every 38 children experienced sheltered or street homelessness. The escalating statistic on students living in poverty or categorized at risk for becoming homeless makes public schools notably concerned for the education of these children and youth.

Educators are aware that students identified as homeless and in public schools are on the rise. Miller (2011a) stated approximately one million students in the U.S. were identified as homeless in the 2009-2010 school year. It is estimated that out of every 200 children living in the United States today, three are homeless, and more than double that number are at risk for homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009a). The majority of research on homeless children shows educational failure is often associated with children and youth experiencing homelessness. According to Miller (2011b) homeless students come from a variety of backgrounds and living conditions, which influences their comprehensive educational experiences. Current research shows a strong correlation between the connections a child makes in his early years and the development of his brain. According to Bassuk, et al. (2011) “children in stable environments with access to stimulating early play and educational experiences develop neural pathways in the brain that lay a foundation for academic readiness, positive social skills, and emotional stability” (p. 11). The statistics on homeless children and youth in public schools
provide important data, however data alone do not allow educators to understand the homeless experience.

Educators have a desire to create an environment where all students can achieve. Despite the good intentions of educators, many are attuned only to the policy and law regulating the educational services and programs for homeless students. The increase in number of homeless students has increased the demand for services provided by schools, and schools in many cases, lack the funds and staffing to meet these demands. In an effort to address educational challenges affecting homeless students, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (P.L. 100-77) was established. It was revised and renamed in 1990 as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (P.L. 100-645) and later reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (P.L. 107-110). This act was made into law to provide funding for services and programs to support homeless students. However, the law treats the population as a whole and often does not allow for the multitude of differences among students as a subgroup. Schools are distinctly driven by federal legislation and charged with doing more to support homeless children. Educators must be aware of the legal mandates assuring their education, but also what homeless children are experiencing and the effects it has on their education (Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997). Working to support homeless students within the context of legislative orders requires understanding of homelessness from a student’s perspective. This study examining homelessness through a new set of lens, will be useful to schools because it will examine the broader picture of homelessness and the academic, emotional, and social needs of homeless students through their own eyes.

Children experiencing homelessness have a unique perspective to share. Homeless students often feel safe at school because they know what to expect. Moore and McArthur
(2011) posited children experiencing homelessness can find school to be a stable and familiar place in their otherwise uncertain lives (p. 147). Children who experience homelessness are at risk for exposure to a stressful life where the family dynamics can play a role in the links between home and school. Research shows that although schools can play an important role to children who are homeless, they cannot fill all the gaps caused by homelessness. However, schools can provide an environment that supports physical, emotional, and social development of homeless students (Rafferty, 1995). Achieving success at school requires school personnel to understand the lived experience as it relates to challenges homeless youth face in achieving their educational goals, such as enrollment and attendance.

It is extremely difficult for homeless students to attend school if they must first meet their own basic needs for shelter, food, and clothing. Maslow (1943) defined five “basic human needs organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency” (p. 375): (1) physiological – air, food, drink, shelter, etc.; (2) safety – protection, security, order, law, stability, and limits; (3) love – family, affection, relationships, work group, etc., (4) esteem – achievement, status, responsibility, reputation; and, (5) self-actualization – personal growth and fulfillment. Schools appear to be addressing the basic physiological and safety needs, but schools must move beyond basic needs to address sense of belonging.

Students who are homeless are people first (Wilder, Rotz, & Sonntag, 2006, p. 2). Homeless students have aspirations, abilities, personality traits, and skills unique to them just like their peers. However, school personnel do not have a good understanding of homelessness in general. Nunez (1994) stated, “teachers often know little if anything about homeless students’ circumstances or how homelessness affects children’s education” (p. 66). The increase in
children experiencing homelessness warrants more research from the student’s perspective instead of focusing on just understanding the families’ experience.

The interpretation of home from the homeless student’s perspective is important to this study. The denotative definition of home, as characteristically found in dictionaries, policies, and laws provide only one account of homelessness. The connotative definition of home defined by students who are homeless can provide a picture of homelessness that is different, but relevant and significant to society and specifically schools. This study allows homeless students a voice to the notion of home and the lived experience.

Homeless students operate without a typical home environment. Research has focused on meeting the needs of homeless children in specific environments, such as home or school, but has not thoroughly examined the interaction between the two settings. This study investigates whether or not homeless adolescents lack critical links between home and school, and if these missing components exist, whether or not transitions between the environments are more difficult. Prater, Sileo, and Black (2000) reported in U.S. schools today, there is an increasing number of students who are affected by “environmental, familial, educational, and interpersonal risk factors” (p. 53), all of which interfere with students’ basic needs and the ability to learn. In the case of school-aged children experiencing homelessness, the interactions and links between home and school may operate independently. A theory that examines the developing person from an ecological perspective, and not just conceptually or operationally, but with reference to the interconnecting environments directly associated with the homeless child is of importance.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

A theoretical framework called ecological systems theory provides a model for the interaction between a child and specific environments or ecosystems she transitions between and
within. Ecological systems theory is a framework that conceptualizes the child-environment interaction and the individual needs of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). Ecological systems theory does not allow for independent systematic organization; and therefore, does not address the inadequacies of missing system components or allow for difficult transitions between environments, when there is a lack of physical space, such as home. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005) “the degree of stability, consistency, and predictability over time in any element of any level of the systems constituting an ecology of human development is critical for the effective operation of the system in question” (pp. 162-163). The connections between the levels of the ecological systems is important to homeless students and schools as it establishes the basis for the relations at home and school, and the successful transitions or links between them. Research has focused on meeting the needs of homeless students in specific environments, but has not thoroughly examined the interaction between these environments. Thus, ecological system theory provides an appropriate model to conceptualize the interconnected environmental systems impact on homeless students.

**Purpose/Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand the lived experience of urban homeless students and to examine how he/she effectively operates between systems, such as home and school, when home is dysfunctional, and to evaluate to what extent schools are meeting the needs of homeless students. One description of homelessness that is especially pertinent to this study is the notion of home. The types of stories to be collected are from the student’s perspective on what life means without a home.
The four to six participants used in this study are urban high school students, identified as homeless, between the ages of 14-19, and living in a shelter or agency. Objectives for this study included the following:

1. To describe urban homeless students’ perspective with regards to the notion of home.
2. To describe urban homeless students’ lived experience and how this experience affects the homeless student at school.
3. To understand how the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act addresses the needs of urban homeless student.

**Research Questions**

This study examined the essence of the lived experience from a student’s perspective with regard to what it means to be homeless. The central question guiding the study is the following: What stories do homeless students have to tell? Following the central question, three sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question, but also to guide the interviews to obtain descriptive accounts of the lived experience from homeless students’ perspective:

1. What does “home” mean to the urban homeless student?
2. How does the experience of being homeless affect the urban homeless student at school?
3. How does the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act meet the needs of urban homeless students?

**Summary**

However informative the statistics on homelessness may be, they only paint a numerical picture of the homeless situation. Understanding the actual experience of homelessness requires a different kind of descriptive data taken directly from the personal experiences of homeless
students. Students remain untapped resources for constructing knowledge about homelessness, information needed by teachers and administrators to better meet the needs of homeless students. Students’ voices are not being solicited or valued as experts in their environments, such as home, school, or community. The Family Center suggests that many children experiencing homelessness are “invisible to most of us; they have no voice and no constituency” (Bassuk, et al., 2011, p. 8). American schools today are faced with the challenges of becoming more culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse. The complex array of issues associated with homeless students is significant for schools.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand current issues related to homelessness, a review of the history of homelessness, the theoretical framework used for this study, and policy and law relevant to homeless students are needed. Beginning in the first section, the review of the literature shows homelessness depicted into chronological periods.

**History of Homelessness in the United States**

Homeless Americans is not a new phenomenon; homelessness has been a part of America for many years. Johnson (1988) depicted homelessness into historical eras specifically labeled for the homeless problem that predominated during that period of time. Beginning with the Colonial Period, 1725-1864, immigration patterns and economic challenges created the “vagrants” and the ending of the Civil War resulted in the “tramps” from 1865-1900. From the start of the 1900s, homelessness soon became viewed as a consequence of unemployment and the “deviants” from the Progressive Era, 1900-1929 were considered by-products of the industrial system (p. 17). Homelessness during the Depression Era, 1929-1944, made a dramatic increase. Wallace (1965) reported that all previous records of homelessness were broken during the depression. Official government surveys estimated homelessness at one percent of the population, or 1.2 million people in mid-January in 1933 (Burt, Aron, Lee, & Valente, 2001). With the change in numbers of homelessness, a new form of homelessness began to appear.

Homeless minors, accompanied or unaccompanied, began appearing and society starting looking at this subgroup as less as a character fault, and more as an economic problem (Hoch, 1987; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Response to these minors was more helpful and less harsh as in previous eras. However, during the recent Skid Row Era, 1950-1979, homeless people became
less visible because the economy was growing and jobs were abundant, but the new face of homelessness continued to grow.

The last period, Modern Era, Post-1980, depicts homelessness as a multiple dimension in U.S. society. Homelessness during this period could be seen in all parts of the country, not just in urban cities. The once predominant demographics of single men and women associated with homelessness, no longer exist because homelessness now encompasses families and children. According to Johnson (1988) today’s homeless are women with a huge portion of them with children. The modern era homeless are no longer considered part of the unsheltered homeless population, instead more and more homeless persons are living in shelters (Kusmer, 2002). Additionally, homelessness as defined today, includes a new group of individuals that are living doubled up with friends or relatives (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009b). And finally, as a result of the sharp economic decline and the larger percentage of people living in poverty, poverty has become a risk that cannot be ignored, as it is only one step away from becoming homeless.

**Modern Day Homelessness in the United States**

Historical literature illustrates epochs of homelessness occurred as a result of immigration patterns, economic hardship, war, growth patterns in American industry, and social concerns. Homelessness today remains a critical economic and social problem with trends relating to the very same factors as examined over time. However, the causes of displacement are shifting, foreshadowing a new face of homelessness that is dramatically visible to society. The new face of homelessness is now including more women, children, and youth.
Major Findings

The 1980s brought more critical social problems, such as the changing expectations for women’s career and family position brought on by the women’s movement (Meyer & Whittier, 1994), and with it more women, children, and youth experiencing homelessness. By the middle of the 1980s, researchers found about 20-25% of the homeless were single women with an average age in the mid 30’s (Rossi, 1994). Homelessness was no longer conceived as an issue that pertained to single men and women, but to families with children. Burt, et al. (2001) stated that over 600,000 families a year would experience homelessness. Families with children were a growing subgroup of homelessness, and there exist a marked need for programs and services to support them. The 1980s marked the end of surplus housing units for those in need, and with this increase in need came the reliance on nongovernmental agencies and services (Varney & van Vilet, 2008).

As reports in the 1990s showed thousands were homeless on any given night. According to Rossi (1994) more than a million people have had one or more episodes of homelessness over a period of a year. During the 1990s, the scope of homelessness became more visible as the federal government stepped up its efforts to address its multiple causes. Homelessness in the 21st century remains a complex social issue. According to Duffield and Lovell (2008) the complexity of homelessness today will have a lasting impact on children and youth. In addition to the federal government’s role in funding and supporting programs and services to the homeless, today homelessness becomes more visible in society through purposeful statistical collection processes.

In an effort to provide statistical data on homelessness in the United States, many agencies, institutions, and organizations were founded to help with the collection and reporting
of homeless data, e.g., National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), The National Center on Family Homelessness, U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD became the official governmental reporting agency that examined homelessness and the use of homeless assistance programs on a yearly basis. Each year HUD submits an Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. The report provides data on homelessness, including national estimates of homelessness; trends in sheltered and unsheltered people; use of permanent supportive housing programs; and information on homelessness prevention and assistance programs. The data collected in the AHAR report are used to examine and identify trends in homelessness and are often cited by other agencies and organizations working in the field. The data serve a numerical purpose for homelessness, while the economic factors associated with homelessness are largely responsible for the increase in homeless persons today.

**Economic Factors**

Social class no longer determines the term homeless; it includes families who struggle in the mainstream of society to obtain affordable housing, food, clothing, etc. Individuals experiencing homelessness often revert to making choices between health, shelter, and food. The lack of housing and community are social, psychological, and material dynamics that affect homeless people and are often misunderstood by society. Finley and Diversi (2010) indicated that homelessness is a result of personal choice, a public opinion favored by many Americans. This generalized opinion associated with homeless persons remains a powerful view in society today. However, as more and more individuals become homeless, opinions of personal choice to a realized public issue is changing and is beginning to alter the way society perceives
homelessness in America. “Homelessness is a complex social problem with economic, social, and psychological implications for individuals and for society in general” (Woronoff, Estrada, & Sommer, 2006, p. 36). If homelessness in general is a complex problem, the impact on children and youth experiencing homelessness can only be more complex. Homelessness as a result of the current economic crisis is creating a new lens for understanding the context of being without a home for many families, children, and youth.

An inextricable relationship exists between poverty and homelessness. In 2009, it was estimated that one out of every 38 children living at or below the poverty line would experience homelessness (Miller, 2012). For children under the age of 18, the poverty rate increased from 15.5 million to 16.4 million, accounting for 35.5% of people in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, et al., 2011). The U.S. Conference of Mayors (2011) report stated the U.S. has reached the highest level of poverty estimates recorded in 52 years. In 2012, 46.5 million U.S. citizens were living in poverty, up from 46.2 million in 2011 (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2013). Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2013) reported children living in households with a gross income under $24,000 for a family of four are considered living in poverty. Poverty often leads to homelessness due to the inability to afford adequate housing.

The growing shortage of affordable homes is an escalating trend in America and many families experiencing homelessness are renters. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 40% of the households losing their homes are renters (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). One solution to the prevention of homelessness is to provide families and unaccompanied youth financial resources to assist with housing and increase the availability of rental housing. However, as of 2010, current funding was inadequate for homeless people. A report published by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2012) stated the federal government is reducing
national debt and because of this effort, funding to the most vulnerable is declining. The report further noted that “nearly 4 in 10 homeless people were unsheltered, living on the streets, or in cars, abandoned buildings, or other places not intended for human habitation” (p. 4). Economic factors, such as the availability of federal resources and state funding streams, diminishes the ability of agencies to provide shelter or transitional housing for homeless people in the future.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecological systems theory is based on a holistic approach to child development. Ecological systems theory is an approach to identify and define what conditions are needed for competent human development. Bronfenbrenner (1979a) defined the ecology of human development as “the progressive, mutual accommodation between the developing person and the changing properties of the immediate and broader contexts in which the person lives” (p. 21). Our capacity to live together in society effectively and to raise children and youth to become productive members of society is the ecology of human development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) ecological systems theory is a model that evaluates the individual needs of the child as it relates to the interconnectedness of the child-environment relationship. Ecological systems approach to the study of human development provides a theory of child growth and development as interdependent systems or environments.

The ecological system theory is envisioned with the premise that all systems are interdependent, not isolated. Bronfenbrenner (1994) posited “the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 39). The child moves from one structure to another, beginning with the inside to the outside. As the child develops, the interactions between the systems become more complex.
The ecological network is made up of five interactive structures, or systems, of the child’s environment: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystems. These systems are interdependent, and in conjunction with the developing child the interactions between the systems become more intricate. The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem can be described as nested within one another. According to the ecological systems theory, each of the four components of the developing child must work interdependently. The building blocks or linkages between these four environments help to define and shape a child. The fifth system or chronosystem represents a change not only in the person but also in the environment based on life events or experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). All five systems are part of the ecological systems theory and the process-person-context model.

The process-person-context model is specifically designed to include information in three domains: (1) the context in which development is taking place; (2) the personal characteristics of the persons in that context; and (3) process by which their development is brought about (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This process-person-context model includes the five interactive systems because it allows for the analysis of the processes that link the individual to their environment.

Although a brief overview will be provided on each of the five systems, the microsystem and mesosystem were specifically examined as it relates to the study of homeless students.

**Microsystem**

The first level, microsystem, is defined as the structure and processes taking place in the immediate environment in which the child operates in (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), such as home or school. Home or school as defined in this context, are unique and separate microsystems. The microsystem environment allows the child to engage in a “pattern of activities, roles, and
interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148). The microsystem allows the developing child to work one-to-one in the immediate environment. An important term associated with microsystem is experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). The developing child not only experiences the immediate microsystem, but assigns meaning to the events in that environment. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) “the scientifically relevant features of any environment include not only its objective properties, but also the way in which these properties are perceived by the persons in that environment” (p. 22). In this level, as the child experiences that environment, he/she places meaning to that microsystem. The microsystem, as an ecological context, is often accompanied by differences in behavior. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) a child will behave differently in different systems, such as home and school. It becomes important to realize the differences in behavior as a child interacts between different microsystems.

The microsystem is the level closest to the child and the interactions within it are considered bi-directional. Bi-directional implies that the interactions towards the child and away from the child are equally important. In the microsystem, the interactions are complex and the bi-directional influences have the largest impact on the child. The interactions as contexts to human development are important in the definition of dyad. Bronfenbrenner (1979b) noted, “the presence of a relation in both directions establishes…a dyad: a dyad is formed whenever two persons pay attention to or participate in one another’s activities” (p. 56). A dyad is critical to the development of the interpersonal structures found in each microsystem. In the case of a homeless student, he/she may or may not have an adult functioning as a dyad at home. This lack of dyad at home creates a break down in the interpersonal structures found in the home microsystem. In other words, the home becomes dysfunctional and causes the homeless student
to lack an interpersonal structure within the home microsystem. The existence of an interpersonal structure requires more than one active participant.

When there exists more than one person, or in the case of homeless students any adult present, there can be multiple forms of dyad present. The three forms a dyad may take between two people include: observational dyad, joint activity dyad, and primary dyad (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, pp. 56-59).

**Observational dyad.** An observational dyad occurs when one person is more engaged in the activity than the other person. For example, when a child watches a parent drive the car and he/she makes an occasional comment to the child.

**Joint activity dyad.** A joint activity dyad is when two people do something together, but not necessarily the exact activity. An example of joint activity dyad is when older students visit a classroom to read a book. While the older student reads, the younger child looks at pictures and names the images. It is important to note that the joint activity dyad has certain properties that enhance a relation between two people: such as *reciprocity*, *balance of power*, and *affective relation* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, pp. 57-58).

**Reciprocity.** Reciprocity implies there exists interdependence between two people, because what one does influences the other person. An example of reciprocity is taken from the example above. When a younger student begins to identify words from the book the older student is reading, he/she begins to have more complex patterns of interaction. The younger student begins to take this skill into other settings and can do this with or without the older student. As the student continues to develop his/her reading skills his/her reciprocal interaction increases and so does learning.
**Balance of power.** Balance of power suggests that one participant may have more influence than the other. An example of the balance of power is when the older student begins the dyad interaction by being the sole reader of books, because the younger student cannot read. The older student is said to have the balance of power. As the younger student begins to read, the older student will transfer power to the younger student, thus learning and development increases. The transfer of power leads to an important step in the joint activity called the affective relation.

**Affective relation.** Affective relation is when two people over a period of time develop more “pronounced feelings toward one another…positive, negative, ambivalent, or asymmetrical” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 58). An example of affective relation is when the older student and younger student share more time reading together. The students share a common interest and the interaction is positive and reciprocal. The existence of an affective relation helps to formulate the third type of two-person system, the primary dyad.

**Primary dyad.** A primary dyad occurs when both participants exist as thoughts or emotions even when they are not together. An example of primary dyad is when the older student and the younger student are both at school and not together. The two participants miss each other and wonder what is happening in the classroom. The formation of a primary dyad is important as it continues to influence the behavior of both persons. The existence of a primary dyad allows the developing person to acquire skills, knowledge, and values even when the two students are not together.

Regardless of the level of dyad found, the dyad relationship within each microsystem, such as within home or school, affects the overall development of the homeless student. For the homeless student, the lack of dyad at home creates a dysfunctional transition between the home
and school microsystems. The interaction between individual microsystems leads us to the next level of the ecological system called the mesosystem.

**Mesosystem**

The second level of the ecological systems theory is the mesosystem. The mesosystem involves the developing person and the linkages and processes established between two or more settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005); for example, between home and school. A mesosystem is created by the development of relations between a “system of microsystems” (p. 80). The relations or lack of, between home and school, are critical to the progression of development for the homeless student. An important linkage between the systems is how the student enters a new setting.

A critical link between two settings is the transition into a new environment. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) if a child enters a new environment with someone they know, the development of the setting is enhanced. For example, a mother or the child’s primary dyad, escorts her child to school on the first day. The interaction between these environments allows the child to build interpersonal relationships or links. It is the interactions between two microsystems that greatly influence the developing child. Bronfenbrenner (1979b) added,

> The developmental potential of settings in a mesosystem is enhanced if the role demands in the different settings are *compatible* [emphasis added], and if the roles, activities, and dyads in which the developing person engages encourage the development of mutual trust, a positive orientation. (p. 212)

Compatibility is important to this theory, because it suggests that microsystems must be complementary to form more complex interpersonal dyad structures. Furthermore, this theory suggests that two or more microsystems must be compatible for interpersonal relationships to
exist and for the developing person to acquire cognitive and social skills. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b),

The developmental potential of a mesosystem is enhanced to the extent that there exist indirect linkages between settings that encourage the growth of mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus, and a balance of power responsive to action in behalf of the developing person. (p. 216)

As important as dyads are to each microsystems, the interconnections in the mesosystems are important as well. The mesosystem consists of four general participant types: multisetting participation, indirect linkage, intersetting communications, and intersetting knowledge (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, pp. 209-211).

**Multisetting participation.** In multisetting participation, an ecological transition occurs as the person actively transitions from one setting to another (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). An example of multisetting participation is when a student successfully participates in activities at home and at school. When the student moves between two settings an ecological transition occurs and the developing person is called the “primary link” (p. 210). The primary link may not be the only link in a multisetting participation network. Any other persons involved in both settings are also part of the link and are considered the “supplementary links” (p. 210). For example, a teacher that participates in home visits at the start of school is said to be the supplementary link to the student. A linkage is important to identifying the interpersonal structures, or dyad, of the developing person, but there are occasions when an indirect linkage must take place when a linking dyad is non-existent.

**Indirect linkage.** The indirect linkage happens when a third party must serve as the intermediate link when there fails to be active participation in both settings by the same person.
This linkage often requires communication outside the norm because the participation is not in person. For example, a third-party such as a counselor gets involved with a child at home and at school. The indirect linkage occurs to facilitate the connection between the settings, such as home and school. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) when there is an intermediate link and communication fails to be in person, a second-order network exists between settings. The second-order network requires communication in a variety of ways, such as in person or through some means of technology.

**Intersetting communication.** The third type of interconnection in a mesosystem is the intersetting communication. Bronfenbrenner (1979b) stated that intersetting communication expressed between settings with the intent to share information to persons in the other setting is accomplished by face-to-face conversations, telephone, written correspondence, or through other social networks. Communication shared by one individual can remain one-sided or it can be reciprocated.

**Intersetting knowledge.** The final type of interconnection is the intersetting knowledge. This knowledge refers to “information or experience that exists in one setting about the other” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 210). This information or knowledge can come from intersetting communication or from other traditional sources outside the settings involved, such as resource materials, libraries, or educational institutions. The intersetting knowledge is established when information is openly shared. How information is shared and who is involved in the settings create the existence of a mesosystem. The answer to these critical links is significant to how the developing person functions in new settings.

Of special importance in the existence of a mesosystem is how people are linked in settings. There are two types of links: *multiply linked* and *weakly linked*. Bronfenbrenner
(1979b) noted multiply linked implies more than one person actively engaged in both settings; and weakly linked indicates the existence of indirect links or no additional links, other than the original person involved (p. 211). The term weakly linked is significant in the study of homeless students.

A homeless student, without a home, is more often weakly linked because she may lack the traditional home setting with an active adult present. The school then becomes the only link consistent in the homeless student’s life. The weakly linked homeless student lacks the compatibility between settings, suggesting a weaker interpersonal dyad structure. The weaker dyad structure and links between the settings affects the cognitive and social skills of the developing student. The compatibility of these two systems is important to the development of the child, and is of significance to this study. The third level examines the impact of environments not necessarily involving the developing child.

**Exosystem**

The third level called the exosystem is defined as linkages and processes taking place between settings, but one setting the child is not directly involved in, but nonetheless affects him/her (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). An example of this is the parent’s workplace. When a parent loses a job, this ultimately affects the family, specifically the child. To illustrate this further, when a family loses a home because of loss of income, this too affects the family, and the child experiences a loss of his/her home setting.

The exosystem involves a two-step causal sequence that influences development of a child. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) the first step is “connecting events in the external setting to processes occurring in the developing person’s microsystem and the second linking the microsystem processes to developmental changes in a person within that setting” (p. 237). An
example of this causal sequence might include the parent’s workplace, or a sibling’s network of friends, etc. Bronfenbrenner (2005) went on to explain, any social or educational institution that makes decisions affecting a child and his/her family can be an exosystem. For example, state funded food assistance program cuts back on funding and the family doesn’t get enough money for food. The causal effects with regards to the decrease in food assistance influences the development of a child. Furthermore, the compatibility of the microsystems and the events within those settings is compromised and affects the child. The final subgroup of the hierarchy of systems explores how culture plays an important factor in the developing child.

**Macrosystem**

The fourth system of the developing child is the macrosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005) the macrosystem is defined as the pattern of ideology and organization of any given culture or subculture. In the macrosystem, cultures and subcultures may be different, but the interactions between the given systems affect the child. For example, the interconnection between home and school in the U.S. is quite different than Mexico with respective systems varying in socioeconomic, ethnic, and/or religious subcultural beliefs. Bronfenbrenner (2005) further explained,

> Associated with each of these subcultures are characteristic patterns of ideology and lifestyles that are reflected in goals and practices of socialization. As a result, the everyday experiences of children from a given socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious group tend to be similar. (p. 47)

The macrosystem is where traditions, ideologies, and experiences are shared. The macrosystem affects what we think and believe, and what we present to other subcultures.
**Chronosystem**

A fifth system of the ecological systems theory, and one not examined for this study but worth noting, is the chronosystem. This system is designed to include time, not only in terms of age, but also for historical sequence and context. Bronfenbrenner (2005) posited that the defining property of chronosystem is the identification of the impact of life events and experiences on subsequent development (p. 83). Homelessness over time has changed from predominately single men and women to more people in families. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is actually an effect of the current chronosystem associated with the challenges of educating homeless children and youth.

**McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

Two subgroups of homelessness growing significantly are families with children and unaccompanied minors. Regardless of how these homeless children are categorized, all children and youth experiencing homelessness attend U.S. public schools. In the 2011-2012 school year, there were 1,168,354 homeless children and youth enrolled in U.S. public schools, a 10% increase from the 2010-2011 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2014). Homelessness creates unique barriers to education for these children. These barriers include lack of educational stability, transportation, school supplies, clothing, and the inability to meet enrollment requirements. Homeless children often want to attend school more than their peers, and schooling is often more difficult to access due to barriers such as residency requirements, transportation, school records, insensitivity of school personnel, etc. (Rafferty, 1995). Homeless children and youth cannot escape poverty as an adult, when these barriers are not addressed and equitable education provided. One agency that currently provides funding in schools for the education of homeless children and youth is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.
Policy and Law Governing Schools

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act) is a federal law that was passed in 1987. The McKinney-Vento Act was reauthorized as part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. McKinney-Vento Act was designed to ensure all children who are experiencing homelessness the same right to a free and appropriate education as children with permanent housing (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). This act required schools to remove barriers to enrollment and place or keep that student in a school that meets the best interest of the child.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Subtitle B – Education for Homeless Children and Youth), reauthorized again in January 2002, was amended to include the specific educational rights for homeless children and youth. This amended legislation included specific details for each state and Local Educational Agency (LEA) working with homeless children and youth. The McKinney-Vento Act, Sec. 721, Statement of Policy states:

(1) Each State educational agency shall ensure that each child of a homeless individual and each homeless youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youths.

(2) In any State that has a compulsory residency requirement as a component of the State’s compulsory school attendance laws or other laws, regulations, practices, or policies that may act as a barrier to the enrollment, attendance, or success in school of homeless children and youths, the State will review and undertake steps to revise such laws, regulations, practices, or policies to ensure that homeless children and youths
are afforded the same free, appropriate public education as provided to other children and youths.

(3) Homelessness alone is not sufficient reason to separate students from the mainstream school environment.

(4) Homeless children and youths should have access to the education and other services that such children and youths need to ensure that each children and youths have an opportunity to meet the same challenging State student academic achievement standards to which all students are held. (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987)

The policy and law is important to schools as they look to support the needs of homeless students; however, another critical component of the law is the definition of homelessness.

**Homelessness Defined by the Law**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Sec. 725) ensures educational rights and protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness. The broad definition states that the term ‘homeless child and youth’ means

(A) individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence… and (B) includes: (i) 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 accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement; (ii) 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…(iii) children and youths who are living in cars,
parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, and (iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii). (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987).

The legislation also provided a definition to answer the question “Who is Homeless?” The term “unaccompanied youth” includes youth in homeless situations who are not in the physical custody or a parent or guardian (1987). This key provision included preschool children, migrant children, and youth whose parents will not permit them to live at home or who have run away from home.

**Homeless Services and Resources Schools Provide**

Schools are challenged with meeting the needs of homeless students, and key provisions were written within the law to outline how schools address and support the law. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires state and LEAs to support the education, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth. Key provisions of the Act include:

1) Students who are homeless can remain in one school, even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district or attendance area, if that is in their best interest. Schools must provide transportation.

2) Children and youths who are homeless can enroll in school and begin attending immediately, even if they cannot produce normally required documents, such as birth certificates, proof of guardianship, immunization records, or proof of residency.

3) Every school district must designate a homeless liaison to ensure the McKinney-Vento Act is implemented in the district. Homeless liaisons have many critical
responsibilities, including identification, enrollment, and collaboration with community agencies.

4) Every state must designate a state coordinator to ensure the McKinney-Vento Act is implemented in the state.

5) Both state coordinators and homeless liaisons must collaborate with other agencies serving homeless children, youths, and families to enhance educational attendance and success.

6) State departments of education and school districts must review and revise their policies and practices to eliminate barriers to the enrollment and retention in school of homeless children and youth (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2011).

The provisions, outlined by this legislation, are designed to support and ensure access to the same free, appropriate education for homeless students as other students.

Summary

This study examined the essence of the lived experience from a student’s perspective with regard to what it meant to be homeless. Three questions were used to guide the interviews to obtain descriptive accounts of the lived experience from the homeless students’ perspective:

1. What does “home” mean to the urban homeless student?

History of homelessness reveals that home is most generally defined in terms of the denotative meaning and this lack of awareness on how homeless children describe home, creates a gap in understanding the connotative term of home. This study investigated the essence of the lived experience from a student’s perspective with regard to what it meant to be homeless.
2. How does the experience of being homeless affect the urban homeless student at school?

The ecological systems theory is a holistic approach to child development where all systems are interdependent, not isolated. The connections between the levels of the ecological systems is important to homeless students and schools as it establishes the basis for the relations at home and school, and the successful transitions or links between them. Understanding the affects that homelessness has on homeless students at school is important for policy makers, educators, and researchers. This study examined the relationships at home and school and the links between the two settings, as it investigated how homelessness affects students at school.

3. How does the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act meet the needs of urban homeless students?

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the policy by which schools are mandated to provide services and programs for homeless students. Schools understand the law and provide resources to assist homeless students. However, it is uncertain whether or not homeless students believe what schools are doing as a result of policy and law is meeting their needs. This study examined if the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act met the needs of homeless students.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative narrative inquiry was used to study how homeless adolescents in high school describe the notion of home, experience of homelessness, and what they need from schools. The selected topic comes from the social and human sciences and the research design was interpretative narrative analysis. This approach integrated key ideas from an interpretive position and narrative inquiry to understand a lived experience. The study used an emergent design approach to data collection. Merriam (2009) stated the emergent characteristic of qualitative study is flexible as the study progresses.

According to Merriam (2009) qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people make sense of their lives, how their worlds are formed, and what meaning they assign to their experience. Qualitative research usually takes place in the participant’s natural setting, providing a context for this study from the homeless students’ perspective. The voices of homeless students in the form of stories provided multiple realities of the lived homeless experience.

Narrative inquiry provided a lens to examine the problem of an underrepresented group, such as homeless students. Narrative inquiry process allowed stories to emerge. According to Rowlands (2005) narrative researchers make themselves a part of the intimate relationship that occurs between the researcher and what is being explored (p. 81). As narrative researchers enter the field of inquiry, they too experience the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The use of narrative inquiry provided individual stories to gain personal accounts about the lived experience from a homeless student’s perspective with regard to the meaning of home, how homelessness affects schooling, and if schools are meeting their needs.
Narrative researchers work within the boundaries, or space, of the participants and of themselves as lived and told stories shed light to the experience. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) narrative inquiry uses the three-dimensional inquiry space to allow the researcher to investigate people in terms of the process of personal change; analyze and interpret an event’s meaning through multiple perspectives; and apply contextual knowledge as a way to make meaning to the person and event.

Four high school participants, between the ages of 14-19, were selected from a group of students in a homeless shelter, creating a space for the voices and perspectives of homeless adolescents to be heard. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) posited during the process of inquiry, the two narratives as researcher and participant become a shared narrative constructed and reconstructed. The individual experiences, or “first-person accounts” (Merriam, 2009, p. 32) were collected and interpreted to understand the homeless experience. Narrative inquiry was an inductive process that allowed the researcher to be a part of the homeless experience and as an inquirer to the experience of homelessness. According to Merriam (2009) a qualitative research process is inductive because it is informed by what we learn.

Qualitative research in this study used the ecological systems theoretical framework. Ecological systems theory is situated in the importance of social and human development through interconnected systems. Narrative inquiry is a method that is compatible with ecological systems theory. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005) the ecology of human development can be conceived as an interrelated ecological system, or set of nested systems. The ecological systems theory provided the framework to understand the stories told by homeless students.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that narrative inquiry involves language of life involving temporality, people, action, certainty, and context. The stories presented by the
homeless students was rooted in time, in personal change, and place or setting; which provided insight to the dysfunctional systems often associated with homelessness. According to Merriam (2009) stories told will have a defined beginning, middle, and end from the first-person account of the lived experience. The next section addresses the research site and participants.

**Research Site**

The research site included a homeless shelter that provided direct services to homeless students in a mid-sized city in the Midwest. Due to the highly mobile and transient nature of homeless students, several sites had been identified but other sites were not used because of the parameters of the study, specifically the proximity to home and work, and shelter support of the research.

The shelter used in this research was a non-denominational Christian organization that provides shelter, meals, clothing, programs and services, and other needed items to urban homeless men, women, and families. One subgroup not supported by this shelter is unaccompanied youth. The shelter has over 300 beds, with a total of 158 beds in the family shelter, and serves over 500,000 meals annually. The shelter has specific conditions for families to adhere to while living in the shelter. The specific conditions include curfews, set quiet time, laundry facility use, and continuous adult supervision of children and youth while in the shelter.

I met with the shelter administrative team prior to participant identification and discussed interview protocols, procedures, and expectations. The agency staff was informed of the intent to identify within their shelter, a total of four to six participants, between the ages of 14-19, and attending public schools. I left assent and consent forms, and blank journals for students to be given prior to the interviews. All adolescents was identified by the shelter administrative team and each student was given a journal in advance to write about their lived homeless experience.
The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes and all four interviews were arranged by the shelter to be completed in one day. Each of these adolescents had a unique story to share. These adolescent’s stories were expressive and they communicated their unique homeless experience.

The agency staff identified four participants, three females and one male. Due to shelter restrictions on unaccompanied youth, participants without adult presence were not identified. All students were under 18 and were asked to get a signed parental consent form prior to taking part in the study. Once the parent consent form was received, the student was asked to sign an assent form, showing their willingness to participate in the study. All participants were informed of their right to refuse to take part in the study, refuse to answer any questions during the interview, and withdraw from the study at any time.

**Research Participants**

The four adolescents who volunteered for my research met the purposeful sampling set forth in earlier chapters. Purposeful sampling that included knowledge of being homeless, male or female, between the ages of 14-19, attending public schools, and living in a shelter. The participants’ length of stay ranged from two months to 36 months. According to Creswell (2007) purposeful sampling occurs when the researcher selects participants that can best inform an understanding of the central phenomenon. In order to protect their confidentiality, their real names have been replaced with pseudonyms: Andrew, Becky, Constance, and Devin.

**Data Collection**

Data collection strategies planned for this study included semi-structured interviews, narrative picturing, and journal records. Specific participant names were not used instead fictitious names represented each lived experience in the narrative summary. Transcribed data
were examined for patterns, unitized and then placed in themes, sorted into smaller segments and applied to an excel spreadsheet for analysis.

In narrative inquiry, the researcher develops a research relationship with participants that reflect a caring community between the researcher and participants. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) wrote narrative inquiry research is a collaborative effort between researcher and participant involving mutual storytelling and restorying. A relationship existed so that both the researcher and participants from the shelter felt comfortable to voice their stories. Data collected were stored in computer files with password protection, and destroyed upon completion of the data analysis.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Narrative interviews were conducted with homeless adolescents using a semi-structured interview process. In a semi-structured interview, questions are often formed in a mix of more or less structure, permitting the researcher to respond to the emerging inquiry (Merriam, 2009). A student interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to begin the interviews by asking participants for basic descriptive information about themselves aimed at getting the participant comfortable in sharing their lived experience. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) pointed out, “the believing game is a way of knowing that involves a process of self-insertion in the other’s story as a way of coming to know the other’s story and as giving the other voice” (p. 4). In this study, the researcher and participants engaged in a cooperative and collaborative “reflexive relationship between a life story, telling a life story, and reliving a life story” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). When the interview was minimized due to lack of response or minimal response, researcher informed the participant of the importance of hearing the lived experiences from an adolescent point of view. The questions that guided the interview were:
1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. How did homelessness begin for you?
3. What does “home” mean to you?
4. How does the experience of being homeless affect you at school?
5. How does school meet your needs?
6. Tell me how does having/not having an adult presence in your life affect how you move between home & school?
7. It’s important for people to understand what your life is like…What other stories can you share about the experience of being homeless?

The interviews were conducted in the student’s natural setting, one-on-one, in a small and private area. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Narrative inquiry is a process of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories from the transcribed data. A narrative researcher spends many hours reading and rereading stories to construct an account from the stories. The result is a story that is shared and reconstructed as a narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative summary was written and participants were given the opportunity to review the summary. Participant review of the narrative summary (see Appendix B) was used as a verification of the findings. This review established validity because the analyzed results written in story form were taken back to the participants and asked for verification of meaning. The opportunity to conduct the participant review of the narrative summary occurred with only one of the four participants, due to the highly mobile and transient nature of homeless students. The researcher, after the review, then rewrote and recoded to further inform the narrative story.
Narrative Picturing

Narratives serve to relate individual experiences or events in the form of a story. To add to the narratives, lived experiences can be shared through visual images and personal accounts of the events. In this study, narrative picturing involved the use of images purposefully selected for participant response and did not include any participant personal information. A narrative picturing protocol (see Appendix C) was used to explain the process to the homeless adolescents.

Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997) noted narrative picturing was first introduced as a research strategy after therapeutic work with survivors of trauma known as Traumatic Incident Reduction (TIR). Images have been used for some time in qualitative research often in the form of observations, but narrative picturing improves the description of the experience by painting a picture of the phenomenon. According to Merriam (2009) images in the form of photographs is another tool to add to verbal data. Narrative picturing provides a visual with a description of the lived experience. Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997) identified two modes of picturing:

1. **Mode 1: Moving Picturing:** This approach allows the researcher to grasp a sequential progression or process of interest. The participant is asked to picture the phenomenon and move from picture to picture as they come into view until the entire phenomenon has been pictured.

2. **Mode 2: Snapshot Picturing:** This approach permits the researcher to capture instances, occasions, or descriptions of specific experiences. The participant is asked to picture and narrate until all pictures related to the phenomenon are exhausted. This mode allows for immediate communication between researcher and participant because it allows the researcher to ask questions and gather additional data on each picture. (pp. 143-144)
The type of narrative picturing used in this study was snapshot picturing. Snapshot picturing captures descriptions of specific experiences by the participant as she/he views and narrates all the pictures associated with the lived experience. As the participant describes each picture, the researcher will have the opportunity to ask questions about each picture (Stuhlmiller & Thorsen, 1997). As illustrated by Stuhlmiller and Thorsen (1997), constructing reality through narrative picturing occurs in six steps:

1. **Select**: Researcher selects the narrative picturing mode or combination on the research question.

2. **Direct**: Researcher directs the viewer away from dialogue toward a pictorial monologue by using simple and clear instructions. The intent is to allow the viewer to move freely, guided by his or her own thoughts and feelings.

3. **Picturing**: Requires space and quiet. Researcher is not to interrupt, interpret, or probe the viewer while he or she is picturing.

4. **Narrating**: Participant will narrate in the moving mode when all picturing has been completed. In the snapshot mode, each picture is narrated directly after it has been pictured.

5. **Explore**: Researcher will explore the pictured information. When the participant has completed narration, the researcher will ask how the picturing experience was, which will then provide an opening for further exploration of the topic. The researcher can then follow up with interview questions or simply probe for additional meanings of his or her pictures.
6. **Debrief**: Researcher will debrief the participant of his or her picturing experience.

Allow for ample time for debriefing so that you can assure the participant is safely at the conclusion of the session, and that a means for follow up is available, if necessary.

(pp. 145-146)

Narrative picturing can be used in qualitative research to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon because it is natural and unplanned. In this study, selection of images was purposeful and designed to add understanding to the denotative and connotative definitions of home. Researcher constructed two piles, consisting of 25-30 pictures each. One pile represented the denotative meaning of home (see Appendix D), or physical space, and images selected were from various concepts, such as *residence, family group, birthplace, place of origin, dwelling*. The second pile represented the sense of belonging, or connotative meaning of home (see Appendix E), such as *family, holidays, meals, clothing, activities, religion, and school*. One pile was placed on a table and the participant was asked to select five pictures that held a personal or significant meaning. The researcher took notes of the participants’ response to the pictures, including the verbal and non-verbal statements. At the end of storytelling on the first five pictures, the pile was removed and then the second pile was placed on the table. The participant was asked to once again to select five pictures, and the researcher continued to take notes of the verbal and non-verbal statements of the participants’ response to the pictures.

**Journal Records**

Journal records are another form of data collection in narrative inquiry. The objective of journal records was to allow the participants to share the lived experience verbally or in writing. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited journals kept by participants in their natural setting are powerful tools for individuals to share their experience. Journals are also another means to
create field texts. Researchers examine the journal entries for positioning as field texts, within the three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Once journal entries become field texts, they then are used to construct research texts. Journals can tell the researcher about the inner meaning of everyday events (Merriam, 2009). Journals provide a participant’s perspective on the phenomenon, which is the premise of narrative inquiry. For this study, journal records were used as a supplemental method to enrich or gather lived experiences in writing from the homeless students. The researcher used a journal recording protocol (see Appendix F) to inform the participant of the journal recording procedures. Only one participant chose to write in their journal. Due to the highly mobile and transient nature of homeless students, the original journal was not given back to the one participant because the participant no longer resided in the shelter. Instead, the journal was destroyed upon completion of the data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Research using the interpretive approach attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that participants assign to them. Rowlands (2005) posited interpretive researchers seek a relativistic understanding of phenomena (p. 84). The researcher used multiple types of data, such as interviews, narrative picturing, and journal records, thus triangulation of the data occurred. The researcher used peer debriefing to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. The peer debriefer independently examined the interview data for patterns and then unitized separately from the researcher using a color-coded system. Upon completion of this step, the researcher and peer debriefer together compared the categories, cut the data into smaller segments, and then placed the segments into themes, and applied to an excel spreadsheet for analysis. A review of the propositions of the study revealed patterns within the data and as a result, development of valid and well-grounded conclusions could be made. Narrative inquiry is
a process of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories from the transcribed data. Data were transcribed into a story after considerable hours of reading and rereading stories.

Narrative picturing served to allow the participants to share visual images and personal accounts of the lived experience and significant life events. As the four participants described the significance of each picture, the researcher took notes of their verbal and non-verbal statements. These anecdotal notes were used to enhance the lived experiences and to make certain that the biases of researcher was monitored. The transcribed data from the narrative picturing process were placed into a visual display so that patterns and relationships were recognized.

Journal recording was used as a supplemental to the interviews and narrative picturing. There was only one homeless adolescent that volunteered to use the journal to record additional thoughts on homelessness. The researcher examined the journal for positioning as field texts, and then the information was used to construct research texts. The texts were added to the script to enhance the description of her lived experience.

The researcher wrote anecdotal summaries of the four participants, including physical and emotional characteristics of the participant at the onset of the interview, the adult who accompanied the adolescent to the interview, and any other specific family dynamics shared by the adult or adolescent prior to the interview. The summaries varied in length based on each of the four homeless adolescents and the notes were used to help construct an introduction to the adolescents’ stories.

Stories unfolded as the research texts from the interviews, narrative picturing, and journal recordings were combined to create rich, descriptive stories from the homeless students’ perspective.
**Researcher Position**

I recognized my biases and in search of subjectivity, I was willing to identify the “personal qualities that contact with the phenomenon has released” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). The method of subjectivity audit, a record of my thoughts, feelings, and emotions as I experienced them, was used to monitor myself. Subjectivity audit increased the likelihood that my personal biases were not reflected in the narrative account of the lived experiences.

I am a principal in a small rural school district and involved with low-income students in my building. I take the position that economically disadvantaged students come to school with specific needs. I acknowledge while these students receive free and/or reduced meals, what food they get at school may not be enough. I also realize some of these students come to school separated from family members, and are doubling up with friends or other extended family members at night. I come to this study concerned that many homeless students are not properly identified and not receiving homeless services.

I acknowledged I have other experiences potentially contributing to subject bias. First, as a volunteer for many years in a non-profit organization, I have chaired two committees specifically designed to assist homeless adolescents. For one year, I worked with homeless students and with the educators and shelter liaisons closest to the child. During my tenure as chair, I experienced a close and intimate relationship with many of these homeless students. Secondly, as part of my district level leadership program, my assigned project was to research and write a district homeless policy. It was through this endeavor that I learned of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

I believe my position as advocate for homeless children and youth speaks strongly with the volunteer work I have chosen over the past 10-15 years, but for this study, I had to separate
advocacy from the research. My personal biases were continually monitored through the subjectivity audit as I interpreted stories from homeless adolescents and narrated their lived experiences.

In order to not influence the stories provided by the participants, I used rigor to ensure stories were correctly interpreted and that the findings could be “trusted and believed” (Merriam, 1995, p. 51). I followed the interview protocol, used the subjectivity audit as the researcher self-reflective tool, peer debriefing to ensure accuracy of the interpretation of the data, and had one participant audit of the narrative as interpreted by the researcher.

**Research Quality**

Narrative inquiry method relies on other language critical to qualitative research. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated narrative inquiry relies on criteria other than traditional qualitative methods of validity, reliability, and generalizability. In this study, I used six criteria of qualitative quality presented by Tracy (2010): *worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, and significant contribution.* One element under discussion in the evaluation of quality qualitative research is ethics. Tracy presents ethics independently from other categories. Gordon and Patterson (2013) posited that “ethics is an umbrella construct that threads through every aspect of qualitative work” (p. 693). Ethics is interwoven throughout the process of qualitative work and this study was guided by ethical decision making from conception to completion. This section examines the role of each of Tracy’s criterion as they related to this narrative study.

1. **Worthy topic:** Research that is counterintuitive, questions taken-for-granted assumptions, or challenges well-accepted ideas is often worthwhile.
Homelessness was a relevant and timely topic because it comes at a time when the U.S. is experiencing increased numbers of homeless persons. Understanding the concept of homelessness and what schools can do to meet the needs of homeless students was urgent. This topic was significant to policy makers, educators, parents, and students in the plight to save our children from this devastating crisis.

2. **Rich rigor**: Research that is marked by a rich complexity of abundance and judged by the care and practice of data collection and analysis procedures.

The narrative inquiry process requires sufficient time in the field and abundant data. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Three forms of data were used in this study: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) narrative picturing, and (3) journal recording. The researcher used care and practice of analysis by using peer debriefing and one participant audit for accuracy of the data and the interpretation of the story. The narrative inquiry provided detailed accounts of the lived experience told from the homeless students’ perspective. A sincere attempt was made to obtain all four participant audits, but due to the mobility of this population, only one participant was available. At the time of the participant audit, there were not any adolescents between the ages of 14-19 in the shelter. This study used a complex theoretical framework called the ecological systems theory. This theory was appropriate to understand the ecology of human development of homeless students.

3. **Sincerity**: Research that is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research.
This study used the subjectivity audit as a self-reflexive tool to monitor and assess my own values, biases and motivations throughout the inquiry process. I was sensitive to use first person voice in the writing.

4. *Credibility*: Credibility refers to practices using thick description, crystallization, and multivocality.

This study used field texts to establish research texts, ultimately creating a thick description of the lived experiences of homeless students. Crystallization encourages researchers to use multiple data sources to arrive at a more complex, in-depth understanding of the topic (Tracy, 2010). This study used interviews, narrative picturing, and journal records as multiple types of data collection sources. The researcher used peer debriefing to assess the accuracy of the thick descriptions from the interviews. Multivocality emerged in this study as the researcher shared valuable homeless information from the voice of homeless students.

5. *Resonance*: Refers to ability of the researcher to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience.

This narrative inquiry was presented in a way that affected the reader. Tracy (2010) explained, “The way the qualitative report is written or presented is significantly intertwined with its content. And, constructing the text aesthetically affects its significance to each reader” (p. 845). This study achieved resonance through the transfer of the knowledge gained to inform practices in public schools.

6. *Significant contribution*: Research that can provide a theoretical, heuristic, and practical significance.

Theoretical significance occurs when existing theory can be examined in a new way. This study examined the interconnected systems found in the ecological systems theory, and whether or not
the lack of these interconnecting systems often associated with homeless students affects them. The participant’s voice was shared with regards to how they operate when the system, such as home, was dysfunctional. The heuristic significance will be realized when further research is done. And, practical significance will occur if the knowledge of homelessness from a student’s perspective is useful.

The overarching question, “What stories do homeless students have to tell?” was important to educators, policy makers, parents, and students. Stories from homeless students provided a different lens to examine the lived experience.
CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVES

From the start of the interview, the four adolescents and I discussed the purpose of the study. On several occasions, I reiterated the importance of hearing their voice and how together we would create a narrative from their perspective. We talked about how their lived experience and their stories could potentially change the way educators, researchers, policy makers, and society viewed homeless students. These four adolescents were not difficult to talk to and the speed in which they began sharing their lived experiences and how comfortable they each were during the interview process surprised me.

I started each session with small talk about my background, my family, and the experiences I had as a single mom. I wanted these adolescents to feel comfortable sharing their stories with me and I felt compelled to divulge my personal history to show them I didn’t come from a privileged life. I shared how I came from a relatively poor family. My dad worked at the local aircraft company and my mom worked as a secretary at the school I attended. I was the youngest of three kids and my parents worked hard to make ends meet. We did not get to eat out often and on occasion we would be treated to ice cream or a soda pop from my grandparents. When I became a single mom in my late twenties, I found myself in a financial bind that resulted in difficult living conditions and often lack of food for my two daughters and me.

I shared this very personal story with them because I wanted them to know I could understand the challenges they are currently experiencing or have experienced. I wanted them to hear my story so they would be honest with me. It was important they felt comfortable and willing to share their lived experiences.
As the narrator, and co-creator of the story, I began each interview with asking the homeless adolescent to tell me about him or herself. Immediately following the adolescent’s personal description, I provided background information on the adolescent. We talked about their homeless experience and they described what “home” meant to them. The students shared their school experiences as it related to homelessness, and some even shared their dreams beyond high school. Throughout the interview and narrative picturing process, I continued to explain the importance of how the story was theirs to share and that together we would create a story from their perspective of the challenges that homeless students face. The narratives are divided into elements that specifically answered the research questions.

In addition to the interviews, each adolescent was asked to participate in the narrative picturing process. The narrative picturing process consisted of pictures placed into two piles. Each adolescent was asked to select five pictures from each pile, and time was given for each student to respond to each picture. The researcher, from a denotative and connotative perspective, carefully selected the two piles of pictures to elicit and/or enhance the homeless experience. When the narrative picturing process began for each adolescent, I reminded the adolescents that I wanted their unique story and I wanted to hear why the pictures had meaning to them.

The last section in each of the four stories included specific themes that emerged from his/her story. There were two common themes amongst all four homeless adolescents: (1) importance of family, and (2) unfavorable shelter conditions and rules. These two common themes were significant in this study because they provided insight to the theoretical framework used in this study. The rest of this chapter was written about Andrew, with the remaining students in the following chapters.
ANDREW’S STORY

I am a creative type of guy. I like to skateboard and I like to hang around with friends and just basically go have fun, go hang out. I like to go and do things that just keep me occupied...play video games and hang out with my family.

Andrew is a 17-year old boy living in an urban city in North Central Kansas. His dad accompanied him to the interview. His mother was not present and I was informed that she had been taken to the hospital the night before. Dad inquired on how long the interview would take, so they could return to the hospital. Andrew was dressed in dark jeans and a t-shirt. He had sandy brown hair with warm brown eyes. He had both his ears pierced. He was approximately 5’10” tall, slender built, and spoke in a calm and quiet tone. His dad remained in the conference room to hear our initial conversations and the interview protocol and then before leaving the room, he asked his son, “Are you okay?” Andrew nodded, and he left the room.

Andrew was in the homeless shelter for a second time. His homeless experience started with the loss of employment for both his parents, first his mom, then his dad. The loss of employment and household income caused the family to struggle and they moved from their house to live with grandma. She lived a long way from school and the commute was difficult on his parents. They commuted for several months before they decided to move closer to school and then the family moved in with his uncle. Things didn’t work out well because his dad and uncle were always fighting. So after a short time at his uncle’s house, his parents decided to move to the mission. The family stayed in the mission the first time this year from October to February. In February, the family left the mission and moved in with his maternal grandma, but when she moved out of state for her job, they had to return to the mission. The family has been
in the shelter for a total of six months. Andrew lives at the mission with Mom, Dad, younger brother and sister. He has an older brother, but he lives somewhere else with his dad.

All students were asked a series of prompts that addressed the research questions. Andrew’s narrative is based on these five elements: (1) notion of home, (2) description of the lived experience, (3) how the homeless experience affects schooling, (4) what schools have done to meet his needs, and (5) narrative picturing results. Andrew did not participate in the journal writing because he didn’t have time due to shelter conditions and his schoolwork.

Notion of Home

After asking the initial question that prompted Andrew to describe himself, I then asked Andrew to tell me what home meant to him. *Home, a place of your own. Privacy. A place to cook, where family can be, and hang out or just have rooms of your own, where you don’t have to share one room with the whole family. A place where you have neighbors, you have people. Where you can go outside and don’t have curfew at 7 p.m. and you don’t have quiet time. A place where some people might have quiet time, but I’m pretty sure my family wouldn’t.*

Description of the Lived Experience

*Living at the mission doesn’t bother me. It doesn’t change my opinion on anything. I’m not going to get depressed because I’m homeless. When a friend asked me where I live, I tell them I live at the mission. It’s not really a problem in my perspective. I saw other families last year at school struggling and was told they too lived in shelters. My experience of being homeless is…it’s just hard! Before coming to the mission, when we didn’t know where we were going, it was kind of scary. We didn’t want to end up sleeping in our car or sleeping out in the street. We wanted to think about our family, think about what’s going to happen. We wanted to make sure we’re all safe. Knowing you don’t have a place, it sucks. People don’t understand*
and until people have put their feet in your shoes, they don’t know how it feels. They can say, “I’m sorry,” but they just don’t know.

The mission is a decent place to have a roof over your head, somewhere to stay. Sometimes you don’t expect the meals, but they are meals that are given to you. I don’t particularly like it because sometimes it’s unsanitary. The bathrooms, or just the people here, I feel like they’re disrespectful to each other. I don’t really like the people here just because they think they can do whatever, blah, blah, blah, and then, I don’t know. It’s a place I don’t want to be when I get older. I’d rather stay on track. But when it’s a time of need, it’s somewhere to come.

When we lost our apartment and had to move back to the mission we couldn’t really keep a lot of stuff. It sucked having to leaving all your childhood stuff behind. I tried to get as much as possible, and what we did keep we had to store it at our uncle’s house. It was hard knowing what you left behind was there for whoever came by. We’d see people just go through the dumpster and take our furniture and stuff, and it made me mad!

We have lost contact with most of our family. We still talk to our uncle and we are actually talking to him more often. But since the mission, time has faded away and we use Facebook and texting to stay in touch just to see how they are doing. But it isn’t like the old days when we’d hang out with them almost every week.

People should know that being homeless shouldn’t bring them down. You should just keep your head up and basically be proud of yourself. Everyone goes through a downfall in life and they’ll just bounce back and will be right back up. This shouldn’t make you sad. It can be upsetting at first, but you’ve just got to go through it. That’s life. You’re not the only one that has – there are some people that are homeless that can’t even come to the mission. Basically,
what you’ve got to think about is that you’re not the only one in this position, and then some people are in worse positions. We have a lot better than some families all around the world, so you’ve just got to think about the positives.

**How the Homeless Experience Affects Schooling**

When I first moved to the mission, it kind of sucked because it was like, “Wow, I’m homeless.” I was mad, just the fact that I didn’t have a home. I didn’t tell anyone I was homeless because I didn’t want him or her to feel pity for me. Schoolwork declined because I didn’t care. I had four F’s. It was a mistake, but at the time, I didn’t feel I was being treated fairly. The teachers would pick their favorites; the smart kids would be all right and the kids that looked like they were bad or because they dressed differently, I don’t know, I felt like I didn’t get the respect I wanted. So that’s one big reason I did not really care for school because the teachers just made me so mad that I just didn’t care. I was like, if you’re not going to help me, than I’m just going to be done trying. So, I believe I passed my electives, because, I mean that was easy. But just the main classes, some of the teachers, the teachers I got, I didn’t really like, particularly. So, I ended up applying to an alternative school and they accepted me. And then ever since then, I’ve been getting everything done that I needed because, I mean you do get respect at the school. They treat you like just a normal person and it’s something that I feel like, oh, I can really do good at this school. I can actually, maybe, be on the Honor Roll or something.

I think students should know that homelessness shouldn’t bring them down, no matter what. It does get better. No matter if you’re staying in the shelter for a couple of months or maybe three to four, or five to six months, it will get better. It shouldn’t bring you down! It shouldn’t make you slip up on your grades at school. It shouldn’t make you all insecure or shy.
You should keep your head up and be proud of yourself. Everyone goes through a downfall in life and you do bounce back. This shouldn’t make you sad. It can be upsetting at first, but you’ve just got to go through it. That’s life. You’re not the only one homeless, there are some people that are homeless that can’t even come to a shelter. Basically what you have to think about is that you’re not the only one in this position, and some people are in worse positions. We have it a lot better than some families around the world, so you’ve just got to think about the positives.

**What School is Doing to Meet His Needs**

The alternative school helps me with my education. It is basically a second chance for kids that have struggles. And if you don’t meet the requirements and slack off, they won’t take tolerance, they won’t take violence. If you mess around and don’t do your work you’ll just be automatically kicked out because they’re there to help you and get you through school. The teachers respect you, and it’s nice there. If I have homework and I don’t understand I’ll ask my mom. If she doesn’t know, I’ll ask my dad. If both of them don’t know, I’ll just get help after school. When I’m at school and I’m struggling and I don’t know what to do, I can get a teacher to help. I get enough time to get my work done, so it’s okay.

My school is going to help me with technical school next year. I’m going to tech school for welding and hopefully I will graduate with two degrees, my high school degree and a welding degree. I hope I can start off with something like welding, if not I want to go in to the Marines. This school treats me like a normal person and I feel like I can really do well at this school.

The school provides me with city bus passes so I can go from the mission to school every day. I have to wake up at six o’clock, get ready and wait for the bus at seven. The city bus takes
me straight to and from school. The alternative school is a second chance. They are there to help and get you through school. I am doing well there.

My counselor at my old school cares. When I tried to get my first bus pass, my counselor asked, “You’re homeless!” I told her, “Yeah, I’m living at the mission.” And she replied with, “Oh, my God. I’m sorry.” Since then she has tried to help me. She contacts my new school and we talk. She told me about a program where you can get a free house, a house where bills except for food are paid for a year. We didn’t win that house, but she continues to try. One program she is looking into for us is a program where rent is based on income. We are hopeful to be getting out of the mission in a couple of weeks. It is a goal of my parents…to get out of the mission!

Narrative Picturing: Denotative Meanings

Andrew went slowly through the first stack of pictures. As I watched him, he put his picture selections into three piles. At first I didn’t understand how he was selecting them, but as he went on I began to see that the three piles meant, “yes, maybe, and no.” When he finished the first sort, he went back to the middle pile and made his final two selections and put the remaining ones in the “no” pile. He looked up from his five denotative selections and said he was ready to share. During the denotative responses, Andrew maintained good eye contact and frequently smiled.

As shown in Figure 4.1, playtime and fun were often done under a bridge.
This picture came to mind because of childhood memories. Back in the day, my friends and I used to go and play under bridges. We’d always find something to do, either play cops and robbers, or we’d just find games to play or throw sticks. There used to be a river down by the bridge and we used to go and play down there too. We would build tents, swim, or just hang out there just for the fun of it. I don’t know why we did, but it was fun. It was great times!

Time may fade away and family members lose contact, but in Figure 4.2, the picture reminds Andrew of an old house that his maternal grandma used to live in and one he enjoyed visiting during holidays.

We used to go out on the 4th of July for like four years. She used to own like three acres and we’d blow off fireworks all night long. We would cook out there. And then Michael, my older brother, that’s the first time he taught me how to shoot a gun, kicked me back right on my feet! Yeah, it reminds me of the whole house that my grandma used to live in.
As shown in Figure 4.3, the downtown bus reminded Andrew of city buses.

Figure 4.3. Downtown bus.

Basically this bus reminds me of the city buses. I’ve been taking them for three years now and I always run around town with friends. I have bus passes from school, so I get on free. One time I just wondered where all the buses went so like for two days, I went on all the buses just to figure where they went. I wanted to know where to go next time I needed to go somewhere. So when my friends were like, “How did you get here?” I could be like, take this bus. It helps out a lot when you actually know where you’re going.

Often times a park is where people will gather to have fun. As shown in Figure 4.4, parks were where Andrew and his family enjoyed birthdays and hanging out with friends.

Figure 4.4. Park.

This picture reminds me of the birthdays we used to have. For all brothers’ and sisters’ birthday we got to go out, every time we had a birthday, or even just like back in the day when my parents had their jobs we’d go out and have a grill out or just hang out with friends and then we’d get all
the neighborhood friends to come with us and their parents. And we’d go out and we’d have, I don’t know, just little, I don’t know how to explain it, just little get-togethers, I guess, and we’d all hang out at the park and just have great times. We’d get on the swings and swing around, but basically we’d just have fun, grilled out almost like every weekend, we did for like three months. I still go to the park with my friends. Whenever I get bored, I’ll be like, let’s just walk to the park and just do something instead of just sitting in one of my friend’s houses all day and doing nothing, or just playing video games, just to get myself out of the house.

Andrew has two grandmas and this picture reminded him of his dad’s side of the family. Shown in Figure 4.5, the lake was where his dad’s grandma lived.

![Figure 4.5. Lake.](image)

I chose this picture because it reminded me of where my other grandma used to live. Her house sat on land that had a river and dirt roads just like this picture. I liked going fishing, catching big crab, and snapping turtles. My grandpa had a whole bunch of cattle that I enjoyed petting, and I took care of his chickens and horses. We’d get on his four wheelers and dirk bikes and we’d go ride around. I remember going into the forest and we would act like hunters or we’d go look for stuff and explore. We would find big snakes, take them back and then we’d have to let them loose because grandma wouldn’t let them in the house. And every Thanksgiving, we’d go out there and have Thanksgiving dinners. She made like the best Thanksgiving food I’ve ever
had. We used to go out there with my dad and uncle and we’d go and shoot their guns and have a
good time. I always loved going to grandma’s house. It was pretty fun!

Narrative Picturing: Connotative meanings

When Andrew was done with the denotative pile, we moved on to the second pile of
connotative pictures. Once again I observed his careful selection of pictures. This time he made
two piles and appeared to make his selection more quickly with yes or no. During the
connotative picture responses, Andrew avoided eye contact, except when he spoke of one picture
and leaving stuff behind. It was during this time he looked up with tears in his eyes.

Andrew has dreams of being in the military. In Figure 4.6, the cemetery brought back
memories of his uncle who was deceased and how his other uncle still alive has shared war
stories.

![Figure 4.6. Cemetery.](image)

I’ve been dreaming of being in the military since I was twelve years old. I used to have two
uncles in the military. One of them passed away when I was young, but the other one is still
alive. The one that is alive is the one that has inspired me to want to go into the military, just
from stories I’ve heard from him. I would say, “Wow, I want to be like him, a war hero or
something.”

Going to grandma’s house was a good time because Andrew would play with this puppy.
In Figure 4.7, he talked about his dog.
Figure 4.7. Animals.

I always loved to go out to grandma’s house because I’d be able to like play with my dog, because I had him from when he was a pup. And it was like, my little dog that followed me around everywhere. He was a good dog, but then he passed away after he got old and blind. But he was a good dog!

Holidays and special events were spoken of several times by Andrew. It appeared as though holidays and special events were his favorite childhood memories. In Figure 4.8, Andrew talked about the 4th of July and Thanksgivings at grandma’s house.

Figure 4.8. Holidays and special days.

Our family used to have the best holidays out at grandma’s house. We always had 4th of July and Thanksgiving together. For four years we shared holidays together. We also would get together for our birthdays. We would go to the park and grill out, or go to grandma’s house and she would cook. We had a fun time!
When Andrew lifted this picture up from the pile, he looked up and had tears in his eyes. In Figure 4.9, the moving truck reminded Andrew of how the mission helped his family move out of the mission. But when they couldn’t make it on their own, they had to leave their stuff behind.

![Moving truck](image)

*Figure 4.9. Moving truck.*

The mission helped my family get a house. They helped us with supplies, like beds and furniture. They helped get cooking supplies. They helped us with a lot the first time we got a house. It was really great and I was grateful for it. The downfall about it is, sometimes you don’t feel like you get treated the same as other people. Just when you see people leave, they come right back in the mission. Maybe you’re just not looking at the same perspective as them, but then you go back to the mission too. When we lost the house, we couldn’t keep a lot of stuff. We couldn’t keep almost all of our stuff. We just had to leave it. I don’t particularly like it here because sometimes it’s unsanitary. I’d just rather get out of here. We have moved a lot these past three years!

Andrew kept his head down and several minutes passed before he moved on to his last connotative picture as shown in Figure 4.10. This picture reminded Andrew of when his family would get together and have fun.
Riding bikes in a park or through the forest, we’d go out. I don’t know… just little get togethers. I remember when my family got together, had fun, and grilled out. I remember when we could be outside without a curfew of seven o’clock. We could just be outside, having fun, and enjoying one another! Now my mom, dad, younger brother and younger sister, and me all have to share one room. We have to be inside by seven o’clock and lights out at nine. We can’t just hang out!

**Themes that Emerged from Andrew’s Story**

There are certain themes woven throughout Andrew’s story that provided insight to his lived experience. The most prevalent themes were the (a) importance of family, (b) positive childhood memories, (c) aspirations beyond high school, (d) unfavorable shelter conditions, and (e) strong sense of self.

**Importance of family.** Andrew had a solid support system from mom and dad and his positive attitude of family, friends, and schooling were evident throughout his story. Family members in shelter with Andrew included mom, dad, younger brother and sister. His shelter length of stay at the time of the interview was six months. Andrew also shared stories of other family members, such as three grandmas, three uncles, and one older brother. Extended family was part of Andrew’s life before coming to the shelter. The family of five had several different living arrangements, which included time with grandma and then with his uncle. Family was important to Andrew and his family worked together to make sure all were safe before and
during the lived experience. Andrew used technology to stay in touch with family who had moved away.

**Positive childhood memories.** Childhood memories were positive for Andrew and stories of these childhood memories were shared throughout the interview, but specifically during the narrative picturing process. Andrew shared many stories of family fun. His strong bonds to childhood memories made it difficult for him to leave stuff behind when they had to move to the shelter. The loss of belongings was significant for Andrew and leaving stuff behind made him feel like people were “taking things from him.” As Andrew shared childhood memories, pets were mentioned numerous times. Andrew had several dogs that lived with his grandmas and his time spent taking care of chickens and horses was fun for him.

**Aspirations beyond high school.** Education was important to Andrew and his family. He had academic support from both parents and homework seemed relatively easy for Andrew. Andrew felt a key component of school was respect. Respect was not given at one school so he transferred to an alternative school where teachers respected him. Andrew liked school and his teachers were available any time he needed help. Andrew has aspirations to complete high school and get a welding degree, and to investigate the military.

**Unfavorable shelter conditions.** Andrew shared many positive and negative stories of the shelter conditions and rules. He wanted to be out of the shelter but recognized it’s “somewhere to come.” Early curfews and shelter rules created a structure that conflicted with his perspective on greater independence and family fun. He struggled with quiet time because he felt his family under other circumstances would not have quiet time. Andrew spent time outside the shelter with friends and family when he could.
**Strong sense of self.** Andrew had a strong sense of self in regards to the homeless experience. The family dynamics played a significant role in the connections he made regarding the lived experience. He was confident and calm throughout the interview and he openly shared challenges and concerns of being homeless while maintaining a positive attitude about life in general. He didn’t want the stigma of being homeless to reflect in his demeanor and he kept grounded through family and friends. Andrew believed homelessness shouldn’t bring him down, he believed his life would get better. Andrew stated, “It will get better as long as you have parents that are actually trying, or if you have a job yourself, you can do something about it.”
CHAPTER 5

BECKY’S STORY

I’m seventeen. I’m a junior at school. I live with my mom and two little sisters. This is my third year at the mission. You don’t get to keep a lot of things. I mean, every time you have to move you lose everything that you own. So, for you to keep something, you either have to keep it at a family member’s house or you have to make sure it’s on you at all times. I feel like, really it’s harder on us kids because we see our parents going through stuff and we don’t know how to handle it. The experience of being homeless does bring families closer together because you know that no matter what, they’re gonna be there, and not for one day.

Becky is a seventeen year-old female, approximately 5’6” with a medium to large build. She came to the interview without an adult. She is the oldest of three kids. She was soft spoken and generally maintained good eye contact during the interview. She wore no makeup, had her hair in a ponytail, and was dressed in a sweatshirt and pair of jeans. She had a cell phone that she brought with her to the interview. She appeared calm and relaxed throughout the interview, and she multitasked by participating in the interview and checking her phone frequently.

Becky’s homelessness began when her mom’s boyfriend was doing drugs and things got out of hand. Her mom stopped paying the rent and they were eventually kicked out of their home. They lived with their grandma for a short time, but grandpa got tired of them. Subsequently, they moved to a friend’s house and again, they were asked to leave because there were too many people in the house. So they went to the shelter. After one year, they had to leave the shelter for a month and a half. They went to a hotel during this time, but it cost too much. After a short time, they went back to the shelter. This is her third year at the shelter.
Becky’s narrative is based on the same five elements: (1) notion of home, (2) description of the lived experience, (3) how the homeless experience affects schooling, (4) what school is doing to meet her needs, and (5) narrative picturing results. Becky did not participate in the journal writing because she simply didn’t have time. She shared with me that she was behind in her homework because she was so busy helping her sisters with their homework and trying to help her mom find a house.

**Notion of Home**

When asked what home meant to her, Becky replied with... *Home is like, not just a place where you go and lay your head down. It’s a place where family is, and where you can be yourself and nobody’s judging you. And, it’s where you can be you, and nobody’s gonna judge you because that’s your house. You can do whatever you want in your house.*

**Description of the Lived Experience**

*I can’t come in the building without my mom being here takes a lot of time. My mom works until four, and I get out of school at three, so I have to find something to do for an hour and a half. And that hour and half that I have to find something to do I could be doing homework. If I don’t feel well and I just want to sleep all day, I can’t because my parent isn’t there.*

*Being stuck in one room all the time is terrible. I’m so happy that I’m seventeen and can be in the building without my mom being in the same room. Because being in one room, all day and all night gets so tiring. I love my mom and my sisters, but I just want to strangle them at times because it’s complicated. I get really bad migraines and I don’t want you screaming and yelling at me. When you have a sister who’s almost thirteen and you have a sister who is almost fourteen, there’s a lot of fighting going on, and you’re just like, “Shut up! Leave me alone I want*
to go asleep.” Especially with finals, it’s really hard, because they are screaming and yelling while you’re trying to study, and your headphones can only block out so much.

You don’t get to keep a lot of things. I mean, every time you have to move you lose everything that you own. So, for you to keep something, you either have to keep it at a family member’s house or you have to make sure it’s on you at all times.

But I feel like it’s harder on me than people think, because I see my mom looking for jobs and not getting a job. All I can do is sit there and say, “We’ll try again tomorrow!” I don’t know, like I don’t know how to get jobs. I’m in the same boat that she is. It is also hard to see her looking for housing, and I don’t know how to help fill out a housing paper, so I don’t help.

My mom’s pretty good at stuff. She wakes me up. She makes sure I go to school. She checks my grades. She makes sure I’m doing what I need to do. So, I mean, she’s pretty good at keeping me on top of things. My mom had three daughters during high school before she dropped out. She recently got her General Education Diploma (GED) and now my mom works, but she is a para and only works during the school year. So she will have to find a summer job. With summer coming up, she will have to fight all those kids for summer jobs too.

The staff here is really great. They do work with you. Like, if I have yearbook work, then I have to tell them I won’t be in at seven, I’ll be in around 7:30. And that’s okay. But if I were to come home at like, 10, they would probably be a little upset with me. But on nights that I have to go to the games for yearbook, they have to understand that for school. I can’t miss that. That’s my grade. They’re pretty good about it. But, like if I just wanted to go hang out with friends or go to the movies, no. So, like, where normal teenagers get to go out on Friday nights and have dates, I’m stuck at home doing nothing. I kind of miss that – us teenagers kind of miss that little section of life where you get to go out on Friday nights and have fun. We kind of miss that.
How the Homeless Experience Affects Her at School

People who are friends, but are not like, best friends, don’t really know I am homeless. I just tell them, “Oh, I have to be in by seven, I can’t hang out tonight.” I feel like that’s something I’m missing out on because I can’t even go to football or basketball games because those games don’t even get over till ten. If I want to go to the movies with my friends, I have to stay at my grandma’s house because movies aren’t over till ten or eleven either. So, I understand the adults having to be in at seven, little kids having to be in at seven, but I feel like if there’s something school related, or if I just want to go and hang out with my friends, then I should at least be able to stay out until like, eleven. I mean most seniors and juniors have curfews at eleven thirty. I feel like it needs to be later for teenagers, especially on weekends because that’s when most of the stuff happens. I kind of miss that – us teenagers kind of miss that little section of life where you get to go out on Friday nights and have fun.

We have moved so many times. The first time we moved, my mom moved while we were all in school. She didn’t even let me get all my school stuff out of the room. So now I have a missing Biology book from freshman year. I don’t think she realizes that I can’t graduate until I pay for it. So, we have to somehow come up with the money so I can graduate next May. If we don’t come up with the money, I don’t get my diploma, which means I’ve been through four years of hard work and dedication, and stressful nights, for nothing. And that’s like, really upsetting because I’ve put in so much time.

I’ve had to switch schools three times because of my dad. Last year, I went to catch the bus downtown when some guy walked up to me and he had a gun. He asked if I was Johnny’s daughter, and I said, “Yes!” And he was like, “Well, tell your dad I want my money and I’m watching you.” When I went to school the next day I talked to our school officer and he called
my mom. I switched schools and was basically in the witness protection program and I had to live with grandma. My dad found out I had switched schools and was living with grandma, and refused to sign the paperwork for me to continue in a different school. Since Mom and Dad have joint custody, I had to go back to the other school and learn to “deal with it!”

I think that it’s harder for me to get my work done because most of the work is online. And yeah, we do have high school tutoring, but we only have tutoring two days a week. I get a lot done during that hour, but like, if I’m missing stuff and the teachers put it online, it’s harder for me to get online here at the mission than anywhere else. I was behind once in Chemistry, so I had to stay after school for like two weeks straight just to get caught up because I don’t have Internet here. I was two weeks late handing in my Chemistry notebook because I was busy helping my sisters with their homework and trying to help my mom find a house. So I feel like homework is a lot harder on us being homeless than it is on other kids…it’s not because we don’t want to do it, it’s the fact that we have to somehow make time to get it done.

My teachers don’t give me any slack, except my chemistry teacher. She knows I’m homeless and she also knows that my dad is trying to get full custody of me, which is never gonna happen because he is a drug addict. She also knew my grandpa has been in and out of the hospital.

I went to Boston in November for Yearbook. We had a conference in Boston. I wasn’t originally one of the ones who were supposed to go. We got a grant for eight kids to go. And one of the kids backed down, and it paid for everything. It paid for your airfare, your hotel, all you had to do was bring money for food and whatever else you wanted. So, I had to ask my grandpa for $100 so I could go. And then, people just started kind of handing me money. My grandma gave me like $35, and then my grandpa gave me $150. I just started to get money out
of nowhere. And I tried, I did try, I tried to bring everybody something back. I got my sisters a purse and a stuffed dog. And my grandma wanted a spoon, but I could not find a spoon anywhere in Boston, so I just got her a magnet. And then I got my mom a shirt that says, “Someone who loves me went to Boston and got me this shirt.” So, I mean, I tried.

I feel like getting into colleges will be really hard because you have to take the ACT and the SAT, and that’s not even the hard part. It’s the fact that you don’t have money for college. I mean if you don’t have money for a house, you don’t have money for college. And I know that some schools are really good about helping kids get scholarships, but I don’t think my school is that great at that. For most teenagers here, I think college is what they want to do! College is big, but since we’re here, I think how are we gonna afford this? There’s no way we’re gonna be able to afford college tuition. And there’s having to pay for the ACT and SAT tests, I don’t think it’s terribly expensive, but how are we gonna pay for it?

Yes, I want to go to college. I want to go to Emporia because they have a really good education program. I want to be a Kindergarten teacher and then five or ten years later go back to college and get my pastoral degree. I want to be a youth pastor!

What School is Doing to Meet Her Needs

My counselor and social worker know I am homeless. So does my Chemistry teacher who will grade my work as being in on time even when it’s not. She understands! But, like, I think they don’t do enough – they’re not supporting us enough! They’re not asking enough, like, “How’s your mom doing?” or, “Are you guys doing okay?” They’re not helping. I would like for them to ask me, “How I am doing” and, “Is there anything we can do to help?” I mean, just simple things. My counselor will ask me, but only if I go in to her, she won’t come to me!
My school provides me with city bus passes. But, I have to wake up at five thirty and ride the city bus for an hour, then switch buses downtown, and then ride that bus for thirty more minutes before I even get to school. After school it only takes about forty minutes, because in the afternoon there are buses running every fifteen minutes instead of every hour like they do in the morning.

The mission staff is really great. They do work with you. If I have yearbook work, then I have to tell them that I won’t be in at seven, I’ll be in around seven thirty. And that’s okay. On nights that I have to go to games for yearbook, they understand. I can’t miss that. That’s my grade!

Narrative Picturing: Denotative Meanings

When Becky was given the first stack of denotative pictures, she carefully examined the whole stack before going back and making her five selections. I watched her go through her short stack and she started with a picture that reminded her of the day room at the shelter. As shown in Figure 5.1, the cots in a gym reminded her of the shelter.

Figure 5.1. Gym shelter.

This reminds me of the day room, because we have cots for people to sleep on because we don’t have enough rooms. When we first got here, we had to sleep out there on the day room floor for like two nights. Then my mom met a guy and got him into trouble, so we had to sleep out there
for like six months. It was terrible! They don’t shut the lights off so the cameras will work. So you have to learn to sleep in the light.

Not all days, but most days, outside the shelter there is someone sleeping on a bus bench. In Figure 5.2, the man sleeping on the green bench reminded her of that bus bench.

Figure 5.2. Sleeping on bench.

When I wake up in the mornings, I have to go outside to catch the bus to school. There is a person sleeping on the bus bench most days because they couldn’t get into the mission. So when it was really cold, I would think, “Wow, ok!”

The park is where a family goes together. In Figure 5.3, the park reminded Becky of the time when her family would simply hang out.

Figure 5.3. Park.

All the people here go to the park, which is right up the street. We hang out or have barbecues, because it’s a lot quieter up there than it is here. Here you have a lot of other people’s drama
that you don’t want to get in. So we just go to the park and hang out, and it’s mostly quiet up there on most days. My family, we do it together.

A house doesn’t have to be a new house for it to be a place to live. In Figure 5.4, the old green house meant something more than a dilapidated house to Becky.

![Figure 5.4. Old green house.](image)

Most people would look at this house and be like it’s a run-down house nobody wants to live there. But, I feel like if we showed this picture to anybody here, they would be like, “Oh, it’s a house, let’s go!” Yeah it might be old and run down, but it’s still a house, and that’s more than we have here.

Sometimes a bus ride means you’re going to have to start over. In Figure 5.5, the picture reminded Becky that there are more homeless people coming.

![Figure 5.5. Bus station.](image)

Most people, if they aren’t from here, they take a Greyhound bus. They end up here with no job, no money, nowhere to stay, so they have to come to the shelter. Sometimes I wonder, was stuff
really that bad at home that you had to come here where nothing happens? I mean, when you come here you have to start over. My mom had a friend who came here and they rode a Greyhound with three kids under the age of five.

**Narrative Picturing: Connotative Meanings**

Before Becky started on her second pile, the connotative pictures, she took the time to place the other pile in numerical order. Once done which only took a few minutes, she went through the second pile of pictures. Again, she went through the whole stack before returning to the start and then selected her five pictures.

The first picture she selected reminded her of laundry time at the shelter. In Figure 5.6, laundry time was difficult to get enough of for a family with three teenagers.

![Laundry Facility](image)

*Figure 5.6. Laundry facility.*

*When you do laundry at the shelter, you only get two hours. For a family with three teenagers, two hours is not enough time for my mom. So we have to take our clothes to the Laundromat, which means we have to spend fifteen dollars, or however much it costs to do laundry at the Laundromat. I went to Boston in November for school, and we are just now getting my clothes washed from Boston, and that was in November.*

Church is important to Becky. In Figure 5.7, the picture of the church reminded her of her church family.
Church helps a lot. Like, we go to church every Sunday. I am President of the Youth Group. When I have a really bad week, I know that I can go to church and my church family will be there and they will just turn my entire week around because they’re amazing! They paid for me to go to summer camp this past summer, and I absolutely loved it. It wasn’t only a break away from here, but it was an experience that I could have not have gone without. I’m going back this year and I am going to be a care group leader, which is a small group leader. I’m going to be one of those leaders and I get to help plan it.

Being homeless is a struggle. In Figure 5.8, the sign reminded Becky how each day is something new.
Every day is a struggle! Every day you get new things thrown out at you. Like, “Oh your mom got fired.” Great, got to find a job now! Or, “That apartment that you thought you were going to get, no, they gave it to somebody else.” So every day is not easy. It’s a lot you have to go through, and I guess you have to take it one day at a time. There are times you don’t want to do that. You just want this part of your life to be done and over with!

Animals can give you hope and in Figure 5.9, this picture reminded Becky that pets are important.

We are not allowed to have pets here at all, unless it’s a service pet. And even then if it’s a service pet it only gets to stay for like two days before they put it in a doggie foster home or something like that. When we moved, we had a dog, so we had to give the dog away. My grandma got a dog and when I was living with her, I would take care of her. My dog, I love that dog! I feel like if they would allow us to have pets, like not big pets, it would help kids know that there is hope, and that they are going to get out of here.

Holidays and birthdays are celebrated in the shelter. This picture in Figure 5.10, reminds Becky of what the shelter does to celebrate those special days.
We celebrate birthdays once a month. But like, if you have a major birthday coming up, like you’re turning sixteen, you can’t have a Sweet Sixteen party. They do celebrate Christmas. They treat us really good in December for Christmas. We get a lot of presents. Thanksgiving dinner is served across the street, but that’s about it. But, we can’t dress up for Halloween. We can’t do anything real festive for St. Patrick’s Day. We don’t have an Easter egg hunt. We don’t do anything on the 4th of July. I mean, you can get a late pass till ten, but the fireworks at the lake don’t even start till ten or eleven. Christmas is really the only holiday we actually celebrate at the shelter.

**Themes that Emerged from Becky’s Story**

Becky had themes throughout her story that included: (a) the importance of family, (b) aspirations beyond high school, (c) extended church family, (d) unfavorable shelter conditions, and (e) typical teenager needs. Family members in shelter with Becky included mom and two younger sisters. Her shelter length of stay at the time of the interview was thirty-six months. Becky also shared stories of other family members, such as grandpa, grandma, and dad. Becky shared of the legal battles between her mom and dad and how this has negatively impacted schooling. She discussed the current employment market and how she feels inadequate to help
her mom find a summer job and housing for the family. Becky is involved with her two younger sisters and helps them with homework.

**Importance of family.** The stories told by Becky reveal a caring, young lady who despite the challenges feels home is a “place where family is and where you can be yourself.” Becky shared that being homeless actually brings families together because “no matter what, they’re gonna be there, and not for one day.”

**Aspirations beyond High School.** Becky has aspirations beyond high school. In fact Becky is concerned about paying for lost textbooks and college entrance exams because she wants to graduate next May. Her dream is to attend college and become a Kindergarten teacher for about five to ten years. Eventually she wants to return to college and get her pastoral degree to become a youth pastor.

**Extended church family.** This adolescent has an extended church family that supports her. Becky attends church weekly and she has grown to appreciate them when things are tough. Her church family has provided unique opportunities for her to attend camp and become a care small group leader. These experiences have led Becky to desire to become a youth pastor.

**Unfavorable shelter conditions.** The shelter conditions and rules have played an important role in the development of negative feelings Becky has with regard to her current living arrangements. The shelter has limited access to Internet and this affects her online schooling. The early curfews play a significant part of her having late homework. Becky often takes time to assist her siblings with their homework first and with a nine o’clock lights out curfew, this leaves little time for her homework. Social life outside the school day is nearly non-existent because the shelter has a curfew of seven o’clock. Becky shared she is missing time with friends, high school football and basketball games, and special holidays like 4th of July.
The shelter also has a rule that you cannot be inside the shelter without an adult. Becky often experiences lag time between when school is out for the day and when her mother gets home from work. She sees this time wasted because the shelter won’t let her in without her mom. Becky also has concerns with having to share a room with her mom and two younger siblings. She has frequent migraine headaches and she described those times as needing sleep without screaming and yelling, but again unless her mom is in the shelter she cannot stay and sleep. The shelter doesn’t provide a quiet place in the building to complete homework. It is done in the one room shared by the whole family. Becky shared stories of trying to complete her homework at night with her siblings yelling and screaming. She even mentioned her headphones could not block out the noise.

Typical teenager needs. Becky is a typical teenager with the desire to want more control over what she does, when she does it, and how she does it. She wants to hang out with friends on Friday nights, or go to the park to have barbecues, go to movies, have a pet, and date. Becky doesn’t want to worry about helping her mom find a summer job or housing, instead she wants to forget these things ever happened and be “done and over with it.” She wants the shelter to allow pets so she can love and take care of an animal. She believes if the shelter would allow pets, it would “help the kids know that there is hope, and that you are going to get out of here.”
CHAPTER 6

CONSTANCE’S STORY

I’m fifteen. We are here because of emotional abuse, I guess, with my mom and her ex-fiancé. My mom came here in August, but I didn’t. I didn’t want to be here. She let me stay with a friend, but when my friend moved out of state, I ended up here. I’ve been here since then.

Constance is a fifteen year-old female, approximately 5’4” very soft spoken. Constance came to the interview without an adult. She has brown hair and eyes, but had very little eye contact, except when speaking of her mom. She was dressed in a jean skirt and a low cut blouse, had artificial nails, a cell phone, and wore no makeup. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail. She had written in her journal, but forgot it. She asked her mom to get it, but appeared annoyed only moments later when her mother knocked on the door to give it to her.

Her homeless experience began six months ago when her mother lost her job because of her ex-fiancé. Before coming to the shelter, her mom went to a battered women’s shelter to get away from him. Since coming to the shelter, Constance feels her mother has shut down and is not really doing what she is suppose to do. She has stopped being a parent. She’s not really looking for a job. Constance believes she’s not trying her hardest. On numerous occasions throughout the interview, Constance appeared frustrated, angry and visibly shaken when talking of her mom.

Constance’s narrative is based on the five elements: (1) notion of home, (2) description of the lived experience, (3) how the homeless experience affects schooling, (4) what school is doing to meet her needs, and (5) narrative picturing results. Constance did write one paragraph in her journal. The journal results are presented after the narrative picturing results.
Notion of Home

When Constance was asked what home meant to her, she replied with *a home is a place that is comfortable, somewhere that you’ve been for a while. A place where your family can be together and that you want to go back to.*

Description of the Lived Experience

*I don’t know…I guess my mom is supportive, I don’t know. Living here I feel like I have to worry all the time. When I lived with my friend, I didn’t have to. If you get written up here because you have a cup in your window, they can put you out. I mean when you have a seven year old sister, it is easy to forget to take something out of your window, or forget to put a trash bag in. It is just me, my mom, and younger sister in one room. On the other side, my two brothers live over there. They are twenty-two and nineteen. I’m really close to my brothers. We’re a close family. We’re just in a situation right now where we can’t be together!*

*Being here is uncomfortable many times. I would say it’s like being in jail sometimes because you have curfew. You have to be in by seven. It’s not like you can make your own food, because there’s no microwave. The food they make is basically just stuff mixed together and they expect you to eat it. Lights have to be out at nine and you can’t come out of your room unless you have to use the bathroom. You see a lot of things here. You see what people go through and sometimes it makes you realize it could be worse. Your situation could be worse!*

*The people here at the shelter really don’t help out. They really don’t even pay attention. Our advocate didn’t even know we were here for two months. She thought we left, and we were here the whole time. If you want something to be done, you have to do it yourself. They basically give you a place to stay and somewhere to shower. They don’t open doors for you…they don’t help like they should. I feel like they have the ability to help more than they do.*
How the Homeless Experience Affects Her at School

At first it affected my grades because I wasn’t able to sleep much here. I’m still not able to really sleep here... the people here, it just bothers you! It feels like you have to worry about your stuff when you’re here. I’m kind of adjusting to it, so I am bringing my grades back up.

What School is Doing to Meet Her Needs

My school pretty much knows my situation. I can get my Certified Nursing Assistant (CAN) and they will pay for it if I keep my grades up. The school offers a program that costs $250. They provide transportation from the shelter to school. I’m actually really close to my counselor. She actually talks to me and she cares. I talk to her a lot about things and she gives me advice on what I should do, or what would be a good idea. If I have to stay after school, she offers to give me a ride home. One time when my mom couldn’t pay rent, the school helped us out.

I believe both the principals, officers, and teachers know I am homeless. I don’t know how they found out, but they all know. They don’t adjust my homework or assignments because I have a place to stay. So I have to keep up on my work.

Narrative Picturing: Denotative Meanings

I handed Constance the first pile of pictures. As she looked at the stack of pictures I gave her, I noticed her hands started to shake. She proceeded through the entire pile and asked, “What will happen if I can’t come up with five?” I told her to do her best and watched as she picked up the pictures and started looking at the whole pile again. She slowly selected five and without hesitating we started with her selections.

In Figure 6.1, the brick row apartments reminded her of the place she called home.
This picture reminds me of when we lived in an apartment on the east side of town, which is not the best side of town. It was always rowdy over there. There were parties all night, like late at night until three in the morning. Basically kids kind of did whatever, ran around until whenever. We moved there when I was three, and we stayed in that apartment until I was six. We actually got kicked out of there because my brothers were really bad when they were younger.

The next picture was more about a story involving her brothers and mom then Constance. She took a moment before looking up. But it was at this moment when she did look up that I began to feel her frustration with her mom. She hesitated and then began to share her response of what the next picture meant. In Figure 6.2, sleeping in a car was reality for her family.

This picture reminds me when my brothers and Mom had to sleep in a car before coming to the mission. She didn’t want me to go through it, so she sent me to my dad. I was young. I stayed with him for a couple of months and actually ended up staying at this shelter. But, my mom and
brothers slept in a car for while. My mom said she always woke up and turned the heat back on and stuff. My brothers really don’t talk about it though. It is part of their lives they don’t want to think about. I try to imagine what they went through, but I can’t!

The next picture reminded Constance of the mission. In Figure 6.3, trains are a constant noise.

Figure 6.3. Train station.

This picture really reminds me of the mission. There are always trains that go by, always. It is noisy with the railroad tracks over there and the station right there. From now on, every time I hear a train, it’ll probably remind me of being here.

When Constance picked up the next picture, she immediately smiled and chuckled. She said she had seen a tent under a bridge and had heard there was a guy that lived there. In Figure 6.4, the tent under the bridge reminded Constance of a guy she’s never met.

Figure 6.4. Tent under a bridge.
There’s a guy that sets up a tent and he actually lives there. He has a table and everything. I mean you barely see him come out. It just reminds me of that. I haven’t met him though. But that is where he chooses to live.

In Figure 6.5, mattresses in a parking lot once again reminded Constance of the east side of town.

This picture reminds me of the east side of town. I mean, it looks like this and there’s a lot of homeless people over that way and they sleep under the bridge. There are mattresses everywhere. I guess, wherever people can find a spot that’s peaceful to them, they pretty much just sleep there.

Narrative Picturing: Connotative Meanings

When done with the first five pictures, she put them back in the envelope and handed them to me. I gave her the next set of pictures and this time she put them into two piles. It appeared as though the two piles were ones to consider and ones not to consider. She finished dividing the connotative pictures and then went back through the one pile and selected five pictures. As this part of the narrative picturing began, it became oddly cold in our conference room and her stares seemed to penetrate straight through me as she shared her responses. You could see and sense the frustration and anger towards her mother in her responses.
In the selection of Figure 6.6, the picture represented domestic violence and the effects on her family, specifically her mom.

This picture reminds me of my sister’s dad who basically emotionally abused my mom, and physically a little bit, but more emotional. And I don’t know, it just reminds me of him and how he was. I really didn’t like him too much, and he was around for seven years! He just acted like he didn’t want nothing to do with me, pretty much. Like my brothers, I have three brothers and he’s a couple of years older than my oldest brother. So, he’s already like young! My oldest brother didn’t respect him, wouldn’t take authority…wouldn’t listen to him or anything. But he would do stuff for my brothers and take them places to try to get them to like him. I remember when they went to Worlds of Fun and stuff and he told my mom to find somewhere for me to go because he didn’t want to take me. My mom sent me somewhere and I was there for a week or something like that, and then when they got back, I came back.

In the next picture, Constance selected Figure. 6.7 because it was a picture of animals and it reminded her of the dogs they used to have.
This picture reminds me of the dogs we had. Like, when we lived over in the apartment, east of town, we probably had like six dogs. I had one that I got for like Christmas and I really had feelings attached to that dog because I felt like that was my dog. I had her for three or four years, but then my mom and him broke up and whatever, and we all separated pretty much. My brother stayed in the house, my oldest brother was like nineteen or eighteen. He stayed in the house with my other brothers, and he paid all the bills. We left my dog over there, but I don’t know where the dog went. My brothers just kicked it out basically. And of course we couldn’t bring my dog here. We just had a lot of pets, family pets!

The next picture reminded her of when her mother was younger and partied all the time. In Figure 6.8, alcohol was a part of her mom’s life and subsequently affected her.

This picture reminds me of when my mother was younger, not too much younger. She used to drink and party all the time, and like all the time, loud music and stuff. And, I mean it pretty
must just reminds of that partying and how we had a whole bunch of people in the house all the time. Like, of course, people we knew, but it was just our house was the party house!

The next picture was a difficult story to hear. Constance was visibly frustrated and angry, her eyes appeared to change from brown to black, and her voice became louder and her tone was filled with disdain for her mother. In Figure 6.9, the picture reminded her of how she tried to escape her life even if it was for only a short period of time.

![Runaway & Youth Services](image)

*Figure 6.9. Runaway and youth services.*

This picture reminds me of when we first came here to the mission. Me and my mom got into it because I felt like she didn’t want to be a parent until it came to discipline. That day she tried to take my phone away and I felt she didn’t have the privilege to do that since she didn’t pay for my phone, for one; she doesn’t buy my clothes, and she doesn’t buy my shoes. I get frustrated with my mom a lot, and so like, I left! I don’t really call it runaway, but she called the police and reported me in as a runaway because she said she didn’t know where I was. I wasn’t even gone a day! I ended up coming back… I just needed time away from her. Here at the mission we are in one room and I have to go everywhere with her. She cannot leave me anywhere. I have to be right behind her. And as a girl, a teenage girl, I need space away. That is why I try to leave a lot, or not come here, because I have to be in a room with her and my little sister all the time. Besides that, since I was nine, I have basically raised my sister and taken care of her. I couldn’t
be just a kid because my mom had to work, and she would leave my sister with her dad, and her
dad would leave her with me. He would go play poker and get drunk or do whatever he wanted
to do. I was left to feed and take care of her. I was only nine! My older brothers were bad, but
they got to do whatever they wanted to do. Actually, I think two of them had warrants at the
time. I really feel like she doesn’t want to be a parent, so I had to.

I have a job. I work as a waitress. I actually got that job when I was fourteen. So I feel
like, if I can get a job when I’m fourteen, why can’t my mom when she is almost forty! I buy my
sister’s clothes...I buy her shoes...I take care of her and my brothers, too. Like whenever they
need money or something, they ask me. They know that I will give it to them, because I’m a
generous person. I don’t like to see my family go without anything. So like I figure, well if he
really needs it or whatever, I’d rather just give it to him than for him to go out and do something
he doesn’t need to be doing, or whatever the case may be.

As Constance’s story stopped, she took a deep breath, put the picture down and then
picked up the next picture. Although I observed her demeanor changed almost immediately, I
didn’t see her eyes, as she never looked at me. When she started to talk, her voice was soft and
gentle. In Figure 6.10, the cemetery brought back memories of her deceased baby brother.

![Cemetery](image)

*Figure 6.10. Cemetery.*

This picture reminds me of my baby brother. He passed away when he was only 27 days old. I
was only one at that time, I remember him, but there’s not too many memories of him because of
course, he was a baby. My mom went to a clinic after all of it happened. Me and him have like the same dad, the same mom. But he passed away as a baby.

**Journal Recording**

As we finished the narrative picturing, Constance placed the cemetery picture at the bottom of the stack, put the pictures back in the envelope, and handed it to me. As I looked at her, I noticed she seemed to have settled down into a calm state of mind. She even glanced at her cell phone a couple of times before she shared her journal writing. I asked her to share her written story in the journal and as she began to read it, she stopped suddenly and told me it wasn’t done. She told me she wasn’t going to be able to finish her journal writing because things in the mission and with her mom and sister were too crazy. As she explained her reason for not finishing her entry, she appeared mad all over again. I asked her to continue, and here is what she read… *It’s embarrassing, frustrating, and probably one of the most uncomfortable situations to be in. It’s like being in jail. They control when you eat and when you sleep. Crazy people stay here. There is a lady who rocks back and forth all day. People who…!*

**Themes that Emerged from Constance’s Story**

Certain themes emerged from Constance’s story that provided insight to her homeless experience. The most prevalent themes were: (a) feelings of abandonment, (b) lack of safety and security, (c) unfavorable shelter conditions, and (d) importance of providing for her family. Family members in shelter with Constance included mom and younger sister. She has three older brothers; two live at the men’s shelter across the street from her and the third brother is in jail. Her shelter length of stay at the time of the interview was six months. Constance shared stories of all her family members, including her dad, her three older brothers, and the sister that didn’t live with her.
Feelings of abandonment. Constance has felt abandoned by several people in her life, but mostly her mom and dad. She has been pushed around between them when circumstances required it, been left out of activities or trips when the adults didn’t want younger kids around, has had to take care of her younger sister when her mom couldn’t or wouldn’t, and has had to abandon her pets when they moved to the shelter. Constance believes the shelter has enabled her mom to neglect her parenting responsibilities and consequently feels abandoned by her mom. When Constance moved in with a friend because her mom couldn’t keep a job and subsequently moved to the shelter, her friend eventually moved out of state with her family and left her behind. Once again this brought feelings of abandonment because her friend left her behind. Constance was forced to move into the shelter because she had nowhere else to go.

Lack of safety and security. The adolescent shared several stories of the lack of safety and security in her life. Prior to the shelter, Constance shared stories of being kicked out of her house because of her older brothers, visiting the shelter for the first time with her dad at a very young age, and having to stay in a battered women’s shelter to get away from her mom’s boyfriend. In the shelter, lack of sleep and constant worrying about the people and her stuff in the shelter frequently occur. Safety and security in the shelter is a big concern for Constance because the lack of sleep has led to academic challenges for her, such as dropped grades. Additionally, she blames the shelter for her worrying because she associates structure and rules for families at the shelter as being uncomfortable and unreasonable, almost like “being in jail.”

Unfavorable shelter conditions. The shelter rules most notably irritating to her are the curfew of seven o’clock, the inability to make her own food, lights out at nine o’clock, and having to be with family all the time. Constance is in the shelter for the second time and misses the security of a house of her own. The shelter requires cleanliness at all times and Constance
shared that her family could easily get written up for leaving a cup in the window or forgetting to put a trash bag in the trash can. These examples of not picking up as the shelter requires could ultimately get them kicked out of the shelter. Constance worries about getting kicked out all the time. Lastly, Constance shared how having to be in a small room with her mom and sibling all the time is frustrating and she feels that “as a girl, a teenage girl, she needs space away from them.”

Importance of providing for her family. Constance acts as the adult at home and she cares and provides for her family. Since age nine, she has taken care of her younger sister. The family structure is such that her sister has a different dad, and when their mom went off to work and left the younger sister with her dad, the dad in turn would leave the girl with Constance. She is frustrated with her mom for leaving her the responsibility of caring for a younger sibling. Constance also shared she works to provide financial support for her family, including her two older brothers at the other shelter. Since age 14, she has worked as a waitress and has bought her own phone, her clothes and shoes, and she is the one her older brothers go to when they need money or something. She considers herself to be a generous person because she would rather give her family what they want then see them go without.
CHAPTER 7

DEVIN’S STORY

I’m fourteen and a freshman in high school. I’m on the color guard team and in choir. I enjoy reading a lot. I’m really into books. You can give me like 4,000 books and I will finish them in two weeks. We’ve been here for about two months. I used to live here when I was a baby. We lived here for like two years that time, then dad starting working here. I live here with my dad, and then mom sometimes. She lives with my grandma. I go between my mom and dad.

Devin is a young lady about 5’3” or so, sandy brown, shoulder length hair and light brown eyes. She wore a green sweatshirt and blue jean skirt. She is the youngest of five kids. She seemed happy and her father accompanied her to the conference room where the interview was held. She begged him to stay a while. They each took a seat across from me and she grabbed his hand. Together they listened to me as I shared a general description of who I was and of the interview protocol. As I was about to start the recorder, she told him, “You can leave now. I’ll be fine!” He got up, smiled and started to leave the room, when she asked him “can you get me some coffee?” He left the room and shortly thereafter returned with a cup of coffee, with cream and sugar just like she liked. She thanked him. He turned, walked out and shut the conference room door behind him.

For the past two months, she has lived mostly at the mission with Dad because her mom works all the time. As a baby, Dad and Mom were both drug users. It was during this time that her three older sisters were taken from her parents. Shortly after her sisters were removed from the home, her mom stopped using drugs, but her dad continued. During this time, her parents stayed together. Devin’s dad was a bit slower to turn his life around, but he eventually got a job at the mission and he too has stopped doing drugs. Devin and her dad got into a special mission
program that helps individuals to overcome obstacles associated with addictions and loss of employment, while learning general life skills. She lives with her dad most of the time and really likes their time together.

Devin’s narrative is based on the five elements pertinent to this study: (1) notion of home, (2) description of the lived experience, (3) how the homeless experience affects schooling, (4) what school is doing to meet her needs, and (5) narrative picturing results. Devin did not write in her journal. She told me, “I love to read, but I hate to write!”

**Notion of Home**

When asked what does home mean to her, she replied with... *Home means being with my parents! They are my world. I would not be able to live without them. I guess I think here at the mission is more of a home than when I’m with my mom because me and my grandma don’t really get along. We fight a lot. I’m a normal bratty teenager, but we don’t really get along, so that’s why I started coming to stay here with Dad. Home means being with my family, I have to be with them. I mean, we could be under the bridge right now and I would consider it home.*

**Description of Lived Experience**

*I’m the youngest of five children. My brother lives with us sometimes. Sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he’s off with his friends. And my three sisters were adopted when I was a baby. They got taken away from us. I’ve met all three of them, but only two of them want to actually talk to me. The other one doesn’t want anything to do with me. I guess it kind of started when my parents got divorced. They didn’t really divorce; my mom left my dad because he went down a really dark road. I mean, drugs, heroine, and stuff like that. When we left I went to live with my mom. I didn’t live with my dad for a while. He actually didn’t come here. I mean they used to fight all the time. It took Dad a little bit to wake up, you know. So he moved here.*
It doesn’t really affect me. I mean, people, they support me. They don’t make fun of me for it. They don’t treat me any different, you know. My friends, instead of asking, “Hey can I come to your house?” They’ll be like, “Hey, do you want to come over?” You know, because I can’t have people here. Yeah, it’s really cool. People just treat me normal. Most of my friends know I’m homeless. My teachers don’t really know, they don’t really ask. They don’t ask, “Oh, where do you live?” I’m sure if they knew…my teachers are really supportive with everything their students do. I love my teachers.

My parents try to tell me what I have to do at school. But, I don’t like it when my parents try to mingle with my social life, so I ask them to stay out of my life and they really don’t get into that kind of stuff. I just say, “No!” They listen to me.

The people under the bridge should know they really shouldn’t be out there. I know it’s warming up, it’s not going to be as bad as it was in the winter, but here it can still be a home. It’s not that bad. I want to tell all those people under the bridge right now that it’s not as bad here at the mission as people would think. I mean you know there are a lot of rules, you have a curfew, and you can’t drink. There’s even a certain amount of time that you can go out and smoke after curfew. You can smoke before quiet time and again go out around 9:45 pm. Parents and children must be in their rooms at nine o’clock at night. But if your kids are gone, you can stay out a little bit longer. You can have friends here. The people here support you. You can become best friends with the staff. They’re here for you; they’ll support you…they will tell you what’s up! And, they will be straightforward with you and be authoritative figures if they have to. I mean the staff is amazing here!
How the Homeless Experience Affects Her at School

We have curfew at seven at night. It is hard to get homework done, eat dinner, and have lights out by nine. You can’t read at night, unless you want to read by flashlight or matches, or fire or something. Sometimes I have to go in to the 501 Room and do my homework. I don’t go in there a lot. I don’t like doing homework in there. Most of the time I just do homework in my room. My dad helps me with homework, or I’ll call a friend that’s in my class and have him help me. But other than that, I lay on my bed, plug in my earphones, lay out my Algebra book and stuff like that and just get it done. I have really good grades. Mostly A’s, B’s and a couple of C’s, like two or three.

What School is Doing to Meet Her Needs

I don’t really talk to my principal. I mean, the counselor knows I am homeless. I’ve talked to her before. I’ve told her my whole story, my sisters, and stuff like that. I mean she supports me. And through all the drama, she’s there for me. But when I told her I started living with my dad, she asked, “Where we were living?” I told her that it was at the mission and she asked, “How I was dealing with it?” The counselor talks to me a lot. I mean, she’ll call me into her office like once a month and she’ll talk to me.

My high school provides bus passes, but right now my dad takes me to school. It’s a long drive. I would have to get up really early to catch the bus and then catch a transfer bus downtown to get to school. So since my dad has a car he takes me to school. I don’t want to get up early so my dad takes me to school instead.

Narrative Picturing: Connotative Meanings

From the moment I met Devin, it appeared she had the desire to control certain aspects of her life and the interview process proved to be no exception. I decided to present Devin with the
connotative pictures first. My decision was based simply on the verbal and non-verbal interactions I witnessed between her and her father. For example, the last minute request for coffee; begging him to stay a few minutes with her; the holding of his hand as they sat across the table from me; and then suddenly telling him he could leave.

I handed her the pile of connotative pictures and I explained the narrative picturing process. I asked her to select five pictures. When Devin picked up the pictures and began looking at them, she was suddenly concerned that she wasn’t going to be able to identify five pictures. She asked, “What if I can’t get five pictures out?” I asked her to select as many as she could and we would start there. She selected three and I told her she could go through them again later to see if there was something else she could respond to. Devin smiled and started with her first picture. In Figure 7.1, this picture reminded her of all the animals her dad would bring home.

![Figure 7.1. Animals.](image)

Before we moved to the mission, my dad would bring home animals from you know, homeless people. Homeless people can’t take care of them, you know. They simply lose them. My dad would bring them home and we would take care of them. My dad said it was only until the people got out of the shelter. My dad also used to rescue animals and we would find them homes. My dad went out to rescue a Doberman one time and he found her out in the middle of the woods, and she had just had puppies. They were so cute! He got the momma dog in the car
and then went back and carried the puppies to the car. He brought them home and we put all of them in the kennel with a couple of blankets and a bowl of food, and we took care of them. One other time he rescued a little Chihuahua. It was like “my” dog. My Chihuahua was my baby and she slept with me that first night. I woke up with her all cuddled up with me. It was so cute! When I looked at her I started to cry because it was the cutest thing ever. I fell in love with her that moment. We used to do fun things together, like she would ride my bicycle with me. I would ride my bike and put her two paws on the little middle thing and she would balance on my legs and we would just ride around town. She loved the air. I mean, she didn’t complain or anything. Her tongue was out. It was the cutest thing ever. However, when my grandpa died, my grandma was suddenly alone. My mom thought it would be a good idea to give her my dog. I complained and cried a lot. That was my baby! I didn’t want to give her up. It made me sad. But I did end up giving her my dog and now I only see her once or twice a year. She doesn’t really remember me. She’s gotten really big.

The next picture Devin selected reminded her of Christmas and Valentine’s Day at the mission. In Figure 7.2, holidays usually included her dad dressing up as Santa.

![Holidays and special days](image)

*Figure 7.2. Holidays and special days.*

*It reminds me of all the times during Christmas when my dad would dress up as Santa. Here at the mission, we would get toys donated…somehow stores figured out the age and gender of every*
kid in the mission, and they would buy us gifts. They spent a lot of money on us. I mean they would buy electronics, toys, clothes and stuff. One year I got a Barbie doll and it was a Barbie that came with those pads and a bunch of accessories and stuff. It was really awesome. I cried over it. It was really cool. Every year we all have to be out in the day room where the tree and presents were and then the kids would have to sing a bunch of Christmas songs to make Santa come in. And then you would hear this “Ho, Ho, Ho!” And Santa would walk in. I always knew it was my dad because I could tell by the way he talked.

There’s this little boy Johnnie. He moved a while ago, but he is so adorable. He called me his girlfriend because I gave him a little card for Valentine’s Day and he gave me a stuffed animal. It was so cute. He lived here for a while; I think they got here before I did. But they got an apartment. I got his mom’s number because that little boy loves me. It is so cute. When he left, my dad sent me a video chat of him saying goodbye to me and that he loved me, and that he’ll see me soon. Every time he saw me he’d be like, “Look! There’s my girlfriend!”

The third picture Devin selected really didn’t have much to do with her being homeless. It reminded her of a story that involved her aunt and her family while visiting in another town. In Figure 7.3, the homeless and hungry sign was about learning a lesson on generosity and empathy from her aunt.

![Homeless and Hungry](image.jpg)

*Figure 7.3. Homeless and hungry.*
We were in another town visiting family while taking my sister back home. She lives in that town. We had just gotten back from the grocery story and were going to a fast food restaurant to get some food and something to drink because I was hungry. We passed somebody in like those common things that are in the middle of the street. We passed somebody holding up a sign that said, “Homeless and hungry.” We went to the restaurant and my aunt ordered extra stuff. I was like, “What are you doing?” And she said, “You’ll see.” We left and I really thought we were going to go pick up somebody, or go see somebody I didn’t know or something and take them food. But then we stopped. My aunt got out of the car and she said, “Get out, come on.” So as we walked to the man with the sign, I kind of hid behind her because I was scared. She handed the man the food. And it was a lot of food. There was like four cheeseburgers, two sets of fries and a large soda. When she handed him the food, he asked if we wanted to pray with him. He put his food and drink down and we all held hands, I literally held his hand. He prayed for us, and he blessed us. He thanked us for thinking of him, and then I hugged him. It made me feel really good!

It was at this time I had to ask Devin to look at the pile of pictures again and see if there were any other pictures she wanted to talk about. She carefully went through them and pulled out two more pictures. She commented, “I got two right next to each other.” In Figure 7.4, the courthouse reminded Devin of when her older brother went to jail.
This reminds me when my brother was in jail. He was maybe only eighteen or nineteen. We went to pick him up at the courthouse. I think he robbed a liquor store and he went to jail. He would always write to me and he was really down, you know. He didn’t know what he was going to do. He was really upset. When we went to pick him up from jail, we had just gotten a new puppy. So we took him with us. My brother got in the car after dad signed him out, and he thought I was holding a stuffed animal because of his fur. I mean it was so adorably soft. He looked just like that dog from Marley and Me. Jeremy screamed when the puppy moved because it scared him. And then he started laughing. He was really happy about it.

This last picture is Devin’s favorite “second home.” Not only was there a story to share about how much she loves this restaurant, she also provided a detailed account of when she modeled to her mother the lesson she learned from her aunt about generosity and empathy. In Figure 7.5, McDonalds is her favorite restaurant.
It is my favorite restaurant, my number one favorite restaurant. You take me there and I will love you. Unless I know you have money, I am not going to ask for much, but I love McDonalds. It is my home. Like, it is my second home. I love that place. Remember the story of the homeless person my aunt bought food for, well, I’ve tried to do that myself. I mean, I took this guy some McDonalds once. I said, “Mom, come on. This is going to be awesome!” I knew she would feel so good afterwards. She really didn’t want to spend money because we didn’t have a lot. We got the man a soda and some food. I got out of the car, but my mom stayed back. She didn’t want to get out because her feet were hurting from work. So, I walked over to him and since his back was towards me I said, “Mister.” He turned around and saw the food in my hand and he looked at me and started crying. I wanted to cry so badly. I hugged him and ran back to the car. As we drove off, he yelled at me, “Thank you and God bless you.”

**Narrative Picturing: Denotative Meanings**

Devin put the last two pictures in the pile and handed them to me. I then handed her the second stack of denotative pictures and told her I was glad she had finally found five in the other pile and I was hoping she could do the same again. She carefully looked through them and said, “I got five on the first try!” I told her great job and she smiled.

The first picture she selected reminded her of her trips out of town. In Figure 7.6, the dog and person in the car reminded her of those special trips.
Figure 7.6. Sleeping in a car.

*This picture reminds me of every year when we would go down to Arkansas. My parents would always go in the middle of the night so we would get there sometime in the middle of the day. I would always be asleep before we left. My dad used to wrap me in my favorite blanket like a burrito, carry me out of the house and to the car. I was all, like comfy. I would always sleep in the car with my special blanket. I was in love with it. My dog got to go too and the back seat would be laid down, and we would always take my dog Baby! It was really fun. I don’t have that blanket any more. We donated it a while ago. It was my favorite. I have a different favorite blanket now. It’s in my room on my bed.*

Devin selected the next picture of a lake. This picture was important to her because it’s a place where she goes to calm down. In Figure 7.7, the lake makes her happy.

Figure 7.7. Lake

*This picture reminds me of how much I love fishing. It makes me happy. I love going to the lake, just so I can go to the docks and fish or something, or even just look at the pretty view. I mean,*
lakes make me happy, they make me calm. Like, I’ll be in a bad mood and we’ll go to the lake on a pretty day, and I’ll just be looking out. And I’ll be like, I can’t even be mad any more. I mean, it reminds me of, I mean, God created this beautiful stuff. He sculpted everything of the world with his hands. I mean, it’s beautiful, you know! Some lakes are man-made, but just lakes in general, they’re beautiful they way God makes them, it’s awesome.

The third picture Devin selected elicited comments on her physique and of a best friend. In Figure 7.8, the Y mostly brought back childhood memories.

I’ve gained some pounds since I last wore a bikini. So I was planning on getting a membership to the Y or to a gym to use the weight room. I want to swim laps, stuff like that, so I can fit into a bikini this year. But it’s not gonna happen. And that, Fabulous Fridays at the Y! I loved it when I was a kid. I used to go all the time. I had a best friend there. We would always swim together and after we would swim we would take a break to eat and drink and fill ourselves up with more energy so we could go run it off. And of course, they would make us wait until our stomachs settled and stuff, you know that stupid 30 minutes, or 10 minutes, or whatever it is. We would do everything together. We would color together, we would swim together, we would play games. I mean, if they would let us go on the slide in two’s, we probably would have done that together too. We did everything together!
Devin selected the next picture because she loves horses. She hasn’t ridden one but loves them. She wants her dad to take her riding because he knows people who own horses. In Figure 7.9, the barn is important to her because someday she wants to have a barn.

![Barn](image)

*Figure 7.9. Barn.*

*I love horses…they make me happy. I mean I’ve never ridden a horse in my entire life. I’m in love with them, and I’ve never ridden one. And, I blame my dad because he knows people who have horses and he won’t take me. My parents went horseback riding without me. I was only twelve and I was at a friend’s house and they went without me. I cried when they got back and told me where they had been. They laughed about it first, and then they saw me crying because they knew how much I loved horses. They took me back the next day to see if I could ride, and she said that she was busy so I couldn’t. But I did get to ride bareback around in the barn for a little bit. It was pretty awesome. It was really fun. When I’ve seen horses, I pet them. It reminded me of how much I want to, when I grow up, I want to live out in the country. I want to have a barn, you know, have cattle, horses, and stuff like that. I want to have my own personal farm. That’s what I want to do.*

The last picture Devin selected was one of a park. In Figure 7.10, the park was a place for her family to go have fun.
My parents and I would have picnics and go to the part and set up and stuff. They would set up a picnic and I would run around the park once we got there. They would play with me for a little bit and we would eat, and then we would play a little bit more and then we would go home. I would always be sad when we left. I mean I loved going to the park. Actually, I went to the park with a couple of friends from here. Their mom let me go with them. We played basketball for a little bit, and then we sat at the court and started singing random songs. Then we went inside and played basketball. The last time I went to a park with my family was maybe a year or two ago, before the fighting started.

Themes that Emerged from Devin’s Story

There are certain themes woven throughout Devin’s story that provided insight to her lived experience. The prevalent themes were: (a) the importance of family, (b) positive childhood memories, (c) aspirations beyond high school, and (d) strong sense of self. Family members in shelter with Devin included dad and sometimes her older brother. Her shelter length of stay at the time of the interview was two months. Devin spoke of other family members in her stories, including mom, grandma, four siblings, and an aunt. Devin is the youngest of five children and her three older sisters were adopted when she was a baby, but only two want anything to do with her.
**Importance of family.** Her family is important to her and she appeared quite content living with dad in the shelter, despite his past history of drug use. She believes home is “being with her family.” Furthermore, Devin stated, “We could be under a bridge right now and I would consider it home if I’m with my family.”

**Positive childhood memories.** Devin shared many fond childhood memories that included her family and friends. One example is how often her dad would bring home rescue animals for her to care for. She would take these animals in and care for them until the owner would want them back or they’d find a new owner. She and her family even took family photos with many of these rescue dogs. She shared one story of a special dog. He took a special liking to her and they would go everywhere together, sleep together, and even ride her bike together. Her only regret was when her mother asked her to give the dog to her grandma when she became a widow. She spoke of holidays together as a family, visits to parks with family and friends, the fabulous Fridays at the Y with her best friend, and going to the lake to fish. One of her favorite memories is of her dad tucking her in at night like a “burrito” on their family trips.

**Aspirations beyond high school.** In one of Devin’s stories she shared she loves horses. She has aspirations to live in the country where she can have cattle and horses, and own a barn. She wants to have her “own personal farm.” She also shared the desire to be a photographer.

**Strong sense of self.** Devin has a strong sense of self and has had family members nurture her sense of belonging and of community. The adolescent told of a time that her aunt showed compassion for a homeless person and modeled helping someone less fortunate. Devin took this lesson of compassion and generosity and applied it in a similar situation with her mom. She shared stories of making donations to others, providing a shoulder to cry on during a time of need, and being involved in a program at the shelter to help others find hope and peace.
considers herself to be a “normal bratty teenager” and she exhibits a strong desire to have control over certain aspects of her life. This is not uncommon for an adolescent of this age.
CHAPTER 8

RESULTS

This chapter includes the results interpreted from the narrative inquiry of four adolescents. The four adolescents identified themselves as homeless, between the ages of 14-19, attending public schools, and living in a shelter. These homeless adolescents openly shared the challenges and struggles of being homeless in a society that has no standard or uniform definition of homelessness (Finley & Diversi, 2010; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Pascale, 2005).

This study sought to understand the definition of home from the homeless students’ perspective, how homelessness affects schooling, what homeless students need from school, and whether or not policy and law are meeting the needs of homeless students. The three research questions used for this study were:

1. What does “home” mean to the urban homeless student?

2. How does the experience of being homeless affect the urban homeless student at school?

3. How does the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act meet the needs of urban homeless students?

The results of these stories were examined through each of the three research questions, beginning with the definition of home. All four homeless adolescents shared a common theme with regard to the notion of home.

Notion of Home

There is a perception among society that homelessness is about the lack of a home, a dwelling place. For these four adolescents, it was not just about where they stayed at night. It
was about family and relationships. Finley and Diversi (2010) stated people share a desire to have a home formed with love and in association with others. This study revealed four homeless adolescents who spoke of relationships in their lives and the importance of being together that established a home. These stories provided rich descriptions on the relationships they had both at school and at home. The connotative term of home was prevalent throughout this study as they shared stories of childhood memories, family, pets, and church.

One adolescent said, “Home is somewhere that you want to go back to and a place where your family is together.” Another adolescent said, “Home is not just a place you go and lay your head down. It’s a place where family is.” Furthermore, another adolescent in this study said, “Home is a house of your own, a place where your family can be.” Finally, the fourth adolescent in this study said, “Home would be with my parents.” This study revealed that the notion of home to these four homeless adolescents was connotative in meaning.

**How Homelessness Affects Schooling**

All four adolescents shared the shelter conditions and rules affected their schooling more than anything else. The shelter has a set curfew of seven o’clock, and lights are expected to be out at nine o’clock. For these adolescents, family and other people in the shelter are distractions and completing homework can be rather difficult. Furthermore, Internet is limited at the shelter and assignments or textbooks online can create an obstacle for the homeless student. Schools could understand that having early curfews and lights out means homeless students do not have control over their environment outside of school. This is not uncommon for adolescents this age to want more control over what they do, when they do it, and how they do it. When the homeless student perceives they have no control over any aspect of their lives, they could behave differently at home than at school. Bronfenbrenner (2005) posited that the stability of the family
living conditions is a strong determinant of the development of the child than was the family’s socioeconomic status (p. 161). Schools need to recognize a change in an adolescent’s behavior or consistently off task behavior could indicate something greater happening in that student’s life, rather than accuse the student of not caring or being less motivated than other students. These four homeless adolescents shared stories of the academic challenges, e.g. completing homework, access to Internet, shelter conditions and rules, etc. they faced, but rather than drop out of school, all four adolescents took an active role in their education.

What Homeless Students Need from Schools

Educators do have a desire to create an environment where all students can achieve. In this study, homeless students have great respect for teachers who support and respect them. It was a common theme in this study that when the homeless student felt respected and cared for at school, they were willing to work hard and complete the tasks and assignments as other students. All four adolescents were in a public school system and they all desired to graduate from high school. From the homeless students’ perspective, the homeless experience in and of itself was not reason for persistent academic neglect.

When asked what homeless students need from schools, three adolescents were very complimentary towards the school, including the counselors and teachers. Becky was the only adolescent with mixed feelings towards her counselor. From her perspective, school wasn’t doing enough, they weren’t asking enough questions. Becky wanted her counselor to ask questions, such as, “How’s your mother doing?” or, “Is everything okay?” Becky felt it would be nice and appropriate if schools took the time to ask her these types of questions.

Three adolescents spoke of future goals beyond high school and these adolescents want their aspirations to be realized. These homeless adolescents have a desire to make better lives
than what they are currently living. District staff could go into shelters to provide counseling to high school students on opportunities beyond high school, such as vocational/technical schools, community college, and universities. Andrew and Constance want someone to ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” or, “Do you know what college you want to go to?” Becky said, “If we don’t have money for a home, we won’t have money for college. So how can I pay for the ACT/SAT tests or even go to college?” These adolescents desire a relationship at school that will inform and guide them to reach their goal of college.

**Policy and Law Support of Homeless Students**

This study examined whether or not policy and law were meeting the needs of homeless students. Yamaguchi, et al. (1997) noted educators must be aware of the effects of the homeless experience on their education and the legal mandates assuring their education. This study revealed that schools are following the homeless policy as set forth in the McKinney-Vento Act, and homeless students are having equal access to the same free, appropriate education as their peers.

Andrew, Becky, and Constance shared stories of bus transportation to and from school. Devin was the only adolescent who didn’t utilize the bus system offered by the school. Furthermore, these homeless students have been allowed to attend schools that meet the best interest of the adolescent. For example, Andrew transferred to an alternative school when the other school was not meeting his needs. Becky has attended two different high schools, but was allowed to return to her original placement school to best fit her needs. Constance and Devin are still in the same schools even though their residence has changed to the mission. Additionally, these homeless adolescents are not separated from the mainstream environment and for the most part, have the same academic and behavioral expectations as other students in the school.
Findings According to the Ecological Systems Theory

In this section the findings of the research were examined through the theoretical framework of ecological systems theory. Ecological systems theory is a framework that conceptualizes the child-environment interaction and the individual needs of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). These ecological systems are interdependent and the linkages between these environments help to define and shape the child. This research specifically examined the relation to the formation of dyads in the microsystems and interconnections found within the mesosystem.

Microsystem

The significance of the microsystems is valuable and important as it establishes the basis for the interactions between home or school and the successful transitions between them. The microsystems, such as home or school, are significant in the stories told by the four homeless adolescents. The microsystem is the level closest to the student and the interactions within it are considered bi-directional. Bi-directional implies that the interactions towards the student and away from the student are equally important. These interactions as contexts of human development are important in a dyad. A dyad is formed when two persons pay attention to or participate in one another’s activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 56). The adolescents discussed their experiences at home and school, and through their stories revealed multiple forms of dyads. Becky, Constance, and Devin identified the dyad at home as either Mom or Dad. Andrew identified Mom and Dad together as his dyad at home. All four adolescents identified the counselor as the critical adult, or dyad, at school.
As discussed in early chapters, there are multiple forms of dyads present in any microsystem. The three forms a dyad can take are observational dyad, joint activity dyad, and primary dyad.

**Observational dyad.** A person becomes an observational dyad when he/she is not engaged in the activity of the other person. In other words, an adult and a homeless student might be in the same room, but only minimal conversation occurs between them. At the observational dyad level, the microsystem can become dysfunctional and can cause the homeless student to lack an interpersonal structure within that microsystem. This lack of interpersonal structure creates an environment where difficult transitions occur. Andrew, Becky, and Devin shared stories that revealed existing forms of dyad at home and school more than just an observational dyad. For Constance, her mom was the observational dyad at home and this created a dysfunctional home microsystem, while at school she had more than just an observational dyad.

**Joint activity dyad.** The next level formed is the joint activity dyad. A joint activity dyad exists when two people do something together but not the exact activity. The homeless students shared various accounts of adult involvement at home and school. At home, Andrew had his mom and dad, Becky had Mom, and Devin had Dad. However, at home Constance did not have a joint activity dyad. All four participants reported the counselor as their joint activity dyad at school.

Regardless of who assumed the joint activity dyad at home or school, any joint activity dyad has certain properties that enhance the relationship between the two people. The properties, or steps, include reciprocity, balance of power, and affective relation.
**Reciprocity.** Reciprocity is the first step and can be described as the existence of interdependence between two people and what one does influences the other person. The interdependence shared between the dyad and the homeless student in a microsystem, such as home or school, affects the interactions these homeless students have in other microsystems. Positive reciprocal interactions at home or school is important to the developing child and all four adolescents had some level of reciprocal interactions both at home and school. Andrew and Devin had positive interactions both at home and school; while Becky and Constance had positive and negative interactions at home and school and this affected their interactions in both settings.

**Balance of power.** The next step of joint activity is the balance of power. Balance of power suggests that one participant may have more influence over the other initially, but as learning and development increases, a transfer of power occurs between the two participants. Stories shared by these adolescents revealed a dyad at home, school, or both held significant influence over them. For these adolescents, the dyad interactions with regards to balance of power varied from one to another. Andrew and Devin in their stories revealed a support system at home that was positive and reciprocal and the transfer of power was evident. For Becky and Constance, they shared stories of frustration as they attempted to assist their dyads at home with various adult responsibilities, such as taking care of a sibling or two, looking for jobs and/or housing, and working a job. At home, their dyads had influence over them, but it did not equate to transfer of power.

At school, these adolescents shared stories of the counselor holding the significant influence. Andrew and Devin felt supported from their counselor and the transfer of power existed for them, while Becky felt underserved from her counselor and the transfer of power did
not exist. Constance felt supported from her counselor, but the transfer of power was still in progress. For Becky and Constance, the absence of transfer of power at home and school meant they experienced difficult transitions between the two settings.

**Affective relation.** The last step that occurs when the transfer of power exists is the affective relation. Affective relation is when two people over a period of time develop more pronounced feelings for one another. These feelings can be positive, negative, ambivalent, or asymmetrical (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 58). These four adolescents spoke often of childhood memories, pets, church, and family as part of “home.” These adolescents have various levels of affective relationships with the most healthy from Andrew and Devin. Andrew has both Mom and Dad with him in the shelter and a counselor at school, and transfer of power exists both at home and school. Devin has Dad with her in the shelter and a counselor at school, and she too has transfer of power existing between home and school. Andrew and Devin have all three steps in the joint activity dyad.

Becky and Constance lacked not only a balance of power but a transfer of power as well. Without the transfer of power, affective relation or step three would not occur. It is important to note for Constance, she assumed all parenting and financial responsibilities for her older siblings. At home, she assumed the balance of power, but transfer of power did not exist. Constance felt neglected from Mom at home, while at school the balance of power was in process but had not led to transfer of power, so she did not have an affective relation at home or school.

The existence of an affective relation at either home or school helped to frame the primary dyad for Andrew and Devin. For Becky and Constance, balance of power, transfer of power, and an affective relation did not occur. The lack of these last two steps meant that Becky
and Constance did not have primary dyads. The primary dyad is part of the interpersonal structure important in joint activity.

**Primary dyad.** The primary dyad exists even when a dyad and the homeless student are not together but thoughts and emotions are present. It is through this level of joint activity that the homeless student acquires skills, knowledge, and values that will influence the homeless student in any microsystem. With these students, Andrew and Devin had primary dyads both at home and school. Becky and Constance did not have primary dyads at home or school.

It is important to note, for Becky and Constance, they perceived her environment at school differently than at home. These two adolescents functioned as a student at school and an adult at home. Bronfenbrenner (1979b) noted that a child will behave differently in different systems. Constance’s behavior at home meant she acted as the primary dyad for her siblings and mom, but since she lacked an adult engaged in her school setting and she acted as a student, she lacked having a primary dyad at school. Andrew and Devin assigned appropriate meanings to the microsystems that allowed them to engage in activities, social roles and interpersonal relations suitable for teenagers. Becky and Constance was constantly switching between acting like an adult at home and acting like a student at school.

Throughout the study, Andrew, Becky, and Devin were consistent in their stories of the importance of relationships, while Constance did not perceive her life with many positive relationships. These individual microsystems and the interactions between them leads to the next level of the ecological system called the mesosystem.

**Mesosystem**

The second level of the ecological systems theory is the mesosystem. The mesosystem of home and school and the compatibility between them is important for homeless students. It is
through these interconnections of home and school that the developmental potential of the linkages between the two settings occurs. An important example of the compatibility of two or more settings is how each of the adolescents came to the interview.

All four adolescents came to the interview with various degrees of support from their dyad or parent. It is notable to share that Andrew came to the interview with his father and together they reported that mother was in the hospital. Devin came to the interview with her dad. These two adolescents clearly had adults at home that encouraged the development of mutual trust and a balance of power responsive to action despite many obstacles. It was clear through this positive interaction between environments that Andrew and Devin were learning to build interpersonal relationships or links. Becky and Constance came to the interview with minimal dyad support and the stories they shared reflected various interpersonal dyad structures within the two different settings of home and school. The minimal dyad support exhibited for Becky and Constance revealed less compatibility for interpersonal relationships to exist and the link between the two settings were somewhat difficult. These interconnections in the mesosystem are important to the homeless student and they provide the basis for understanding the linkages.

**General participant types.** The mesosystem has four general participant types: multisetting participation, indirect linkage, intersetting communications, and intersetting knowledge (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, pp. 209-211).

**Multisetting participation.** In multisetting participation, there exists an ecological transition (p. 210) as the person actively transitions between settings. The degree in which multisetting participation occurred for each of the four adolescents varied. Each homeless adolescent shared stories of transitions between home, school, work, church, and family. They were active in many different settings and each of the four homeless adolescents was considered
the primary link. Andrew, and Devin had supplementary links, or other people involved in both settings, while Becky and Constance did not.

**Indirect linkages.** Active participation by the same person in both settings defines indirect linkages. All four homeless adolescents had no additional links or indirect linkages.

**Intersetting communication.** The third type of interconnection is the intersetting communication. These four homeless adolescents shared information about their family in other settings through face-to-face conversations, cell phones, or other social networks such as Facebook, and written correspondence. Stories from these adolescents revealed that communication was sometimes one-sided and sometimes it was reciprocated.

**Intersetting knowledge.** The final type of interconnection is the intersetting knowledge. This knowledge refers to when information is openly shared. How the information is shared and who is involved in the setting create the existence of a mesosystem. In the example of the interview, all four adolescents openly shared information about their homeless experience. Their stories were rich in description and they shared it through face-to-face communication. For Constance, she added to her story through journaling. All four homeless adolescents stated the counselor at school was aware of their current living conditions.

Of special importance in the existence of a mesosystem is how people are linked in settings. There are two types called multiply linked and weakly linked (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 211). Andrew and Devin were multiply linked because their stories revealed more than one person actively engaged at home and school, while Becky and Constance were weakly linked because they lacked an indirect link or interpersonal relations.
Summary of Findings

The ecological systems theory, specifically the mesosystem, suggests that two or more microsystems must be compatible for interpersonal relationships to exist and for the developing person to acquire cognitive and social skills. This study showed that Andrew and Devin had compatibility between home and school because there exists positive interpersonal relationships between home and school. Becky and Constance lacked the compatibility between the two settings, suggesting a weaker interpersonal dyad structure. The weaker dyad structure and links between the settings for Becky and Constance suggested cognitive and social skills were affected.
CHAPTER 9

DISCUSSIONS

This study provided a new voice to the experience of homelessness. The narrative reports from the homeless students’ perspective provided an insight to the definition of home, how homelessness affects schooling, and to what extent schools are meeting the needs of homeless students. This chapter provides the practical and theoretical implications for educators and policy makers, and future research ideas.

**Practical Implications**

The understanding of how homelessness affects schooling, and to what extent schools are meeting the needs of homeless students was important in this study. School personnel need to understand the importance of accepting homeless students as human beings, and individualized academic, emotional, and social support is important for the continued development of the homeless student. There are four suggestions for schools that would require zero to minimal financial investment to further support homeless students:

1. School personnel need to understand that conditions and rules of shelters or agencies can interfere with the homeless students’ ability to attend school, complete schoolwork, have clean clothes, adequate sleep, and feel safe and secure. At school, it is important to homeless students to have teachers who respect them, maintain open and frequent dialogue, and have a safe classroom environment where all students are treated equally.

2. District staff could go into shelters to provide counseling on vocational schools and colleges to all high school homeless students.
(3) Schools need to further develop relationships outside the school system with community health, social, and recreational agencies and organizations to support the changing needs of homeless students and their families during and after homelessness.

(4) In this study, the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act are meeting the needs of homeless students; however, identification of homeless students remains a difficult task for school personnel. Schools could provide professional development to teachers, secretaries, and other school personnel directly involved with students to support identification of homeless students and to better understand how to respond when a student shares they are homeless.

There are also suggestions for schools that would require a financial investment, but would benefit homeless students. At a time when money is tight, these suggestions will be much more difficult to support, but nonetheless remain an important suggestion to support homeless students. The two suggestions include:

(1) Schools could provide before and after school programs that not only provide child care, but also provide opportunities for homeless students to get their schoolwork done in a learning environment with teacher support.

(2) Schools could coordinate extracurricular activities and before and after school programs with bus schedules to accommodate homeless students specific transportation needs.

Theoretical Implications

This study only addressed two of the five ecological systems critical to the child-environment interaction and the individual needs of child. The ecological systems theory is not
designed to address specific environments, such as home or shelter, it examines the person from an ecological perspective. For my research, I applied home and school as the specific environments I wanted to study. This study discovered that the meaning of home for these four homeless adolescents was more than a physical space it was about relationships. The ecological systems theory was a good theory to use because it allowed for investigating the interconnections, or relationships, between microsystems and the developmental affects on the homeless adolescent.

What the ecological systems theory did not address was what happens when the connections are not there. The study revealed two homeless adolescents were successfully transitioning between home and school and two homeless adolescents were not. The absence of a critical link between the two settings created the weaker interpersonal relationships, resulting in difficult transitions for those two homeless adolescents. Stories shared by these two homeless adolescents exposed difficult home relationships that affected their behavior at home because they were assuming adult-like responsibilities at a time when they were not developmentally prepared. Although Bronfenbrenner’s theory allows for differences in the behavior of the child between microsystems, it does not address how to develop these important connections within and between these settings.

As conveyed before, the ecological theory only allows for the analysis of the processes that link the individual to their environment and does not examine how microsystems could be compatible in other ways, such as an environment-environment connection. The schools and shelter used in this study are unique and separate microsystems, and they did not communicate with one another about the challenges associated with homelessness. This lack of communication between the two settings affected the mutual accommodation for these homeless
adolescents. The causal effects created because of the lack of understanding between the schools and shelter affected, to various degrees, the cognitive and social skills of these homeless adolescents. Stories presented from the homeless student’s perspective, disclosed difficulties with schooling and developing social skills with peers outside the school day due to shelter conditions and rules. A framework that would investigate the significance of the mutual accommodation for the homeless student is important to the overall understanding of homelessness and how microsystems can exist interdependently.

The importance of family in defining home was significant in this study. Since children are the building blocks for society, we must be diligent on examining what we can do to nurture our children to become productive members of society. A theory that would enhance the understanding of the relational aspect of homelessness is important. The ethics of care theory, as presented by Nel Noddings, is such a model that investigates the role of caring relationships and learning. Families are important and they represent the most important ecological system in the child’s development. This theory could further examine the roles and caring relations experienced within the family structure and could lend insight to how strengthening family systems could be significant in the understanding of the learning and developmental needs of the homeless child.

**Future Research**

Further research could be considered on the socio-historical influences on development from the ecology systems theory, commonly called chronosystem. This study only examined a specific time period and was designed to address the interconnections between two of the five systems. Using the chronosystem model would allow the researcher to explore the same group of subjects both before and after homelessness, and the specific impact of policies and laws
associated with helping persons affected by homelessness today, especially children and youth. Bronfenbrenner (2005) posited that the developmental changes triggered by life events alters the existing relation between person and environment (p. 119). The chronosystem model would examine the developmental changes that occurred as a result of homelessness.

This study was initially organized to include homeless students who had an adult presence, and a comparison group of homeless students without an adult presence. However, due to the limitations of area shelter support and current demographics of families within the shelter, this was not an option. A study to investigate the interdependence between settings for homeless students without an adult presence would be useful to the overall research on homeless students.

Data collected was designed to specifically address the research questions in this study. However, other rich descriptive data was shared by these four adolescents, which included relationships and responsibilities outside of home and school. Becky discussed her role as a youth leader at church and the importance of her church family. Constance spoke of work responsibilities and of her older siblings that lived across the street, but not with her. Devin spoke of her participation in color guard and of the special mission program. Further research is needed to understand the significance and impact of microsystems other than home and school on the cognitive and social development of homeless students.

Finally, future research is needed to examine the impact of counselors on the cognitive and social development between home and school for homeless students. All four adolescents communicated their counselor was their source of school support. However not all four adolescents felt the counselor was actively engaged in their lived experience. Future research is needed to understand the impact of school counselors on homeless students and their families.
Conclusion

Challenges associated with being homeless exist for both the student and schools. Students experience challenges related to attendance, homework, shelter and rules, safety and security, and development of positive relationships. Schools have challenges related to identifying and supporting homeless students. The premise is for schools to address the educational needs of homeless students by preparing teachers to work beyond the academic requirements, and provide structure, purpose, and hope to homeless students. These four adolescents shared stories centered on relationships found at home and school and the desire to create a life better than they are currently living. The homeless experience and the interconnections made between home and school are relevant to the education of homeless students. The conceptualization of homelessness will continue to thwart society, but schools are encouraged to go beyond the laws, rules, and regulations, and work actively to develop compatible relationships between home and school, whether or not students are homeless. For the homeless student, successful transitions exist between home and school when positive relationships exist in both settings.
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REFERENCES (continued)


REFERENCES (continued)


132
REFERENCES (continued)


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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction and Ground Rules,

Hello and welcome to the interview. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your lived experience. My name is Donna Ferguson and I am a graduate student of the Educational Leadership Program from Wichita State University. My study is designed to provide a voice for homeless adolescents as I gather information to understand the experiences of urban homeless students and to examine how he/she effectively operates between systems, such as home and school, when home is dysfunctional. Although I will ask some questions to guide the discussion, this is meant to be a semi-structured interview with possible follow-up questions. Please remember I am interested in your homeless experience.

You were selected because you met the criterion of being homeless. All responses will be given credibility. Before I begin I would like to share a few procedures for this conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis today, no names will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. With your permission, I would like to audio-record our session today, so that I will be able to more carefully listen to your responses. The recording will only be used for the purpose of note taking and transcription and will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

You can refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. Withdrawal will not result in any negative consequences for you. You have been provided a copy of the consent form that you signed. I have some extra copies if necessary. Do you have any questions before we get started?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. How did homelessness begin for you?
3. What does “home” mean to you?
4. How does the experience of being homeless affect you at school?
5. How does school meet your needs?
6. Tell me how does having/not having an adult presence in your life affect how you move between home and school?
7. It’s important for people to understand what your life is like…What other stories can you share about the experience of being homeless.
Hello again! Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I want you to know how much I appreciate your participation in my research. Please remember, at our last meeting you were informed of the importance of your story for educators, policy makers, and researchers. It is through your story, that the voice of homeless students such as yourself, are being heard. So again, thank you.

Our meeting today is for the participant review of the narrative summary. Today you will read what I have written and your feedback on your story will be requested. Although I am a co-creator of this story, it is your story to tell and I want it to reflect the accuracy of your lived experience.

My study is designed to provide a voice for homeless adolescents. Your narrative will be used to describe the experiences of urban homeless students and to examine how he/she effectively operates between systems, such as home and school, when home is dysfunctional.

I would like for you to read the story on my computer through its entirety. When you are done, I ask that you share your thoughts regarding the accuracy of the story.

Do you have any questions before you start?

Please go ahead and read...
Ground Rules for Narrative Picturing,

In addition to the interview today, we will examine some pictures. The pictures are designed to solicit a response and enhance the lived experience. Each stack has 30 pictures for you to examine. You will be asked to select five pictures from the stack and you will be given the opportunity to respond to each of the five pictures. Please remember I am interested in your lived experience and your stories, and may ask questions related to your response of each picture after you are done. I will be taking notes regarding your process of picture selection and any non-verbal or verbal statements.

You can refuse to answer any question or to stop the narrating of these pictures at any time. Withdrawing from the project will not result in any negative consequences for you. Do you have any questions before we get started?

**Procedures for Narrative Picturing:**

**Pile #1: Denotative**
30 pictures will be placed in a pile on the table and participant will be asked to select five pictures from the denotative pile. The participant will then be asked to respond to each picture. After each response, time will be permitted to allow researcher to ask any follow-up questions. This will continue until all five pictures have been responded to.

**Pile #1 will then be collected from the table.**

**Pile #2: Connotative**
30 pictures will be placed in a pile on the table and participant will be asked to select five pictures from the connotative pile. The participant will then be asked to respond to each picture. After each response, time will be permitted to allow researcher to ask any follow-up questions. This will continue until all five pictures have been responded to.

**Pile #2 will then be collected from the table.**

When all pictures have been collected, a follow up discussion will occur between researcher and student to solicit feedback on the narrative picturing process and to allow the participant to provide any more input to the lived experience.
APPENDIX D

DENOTATIVE MEANING OF HOME PICTURE LIST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DENOTATIVE PHOTOS IN ORDER</th>
<th>ANDREW</th>
<th>BECKY</th>
<th>CONSTANCE</th>
<th>DEVIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Old Green House</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2 Sofa</td>
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<tr>
<td>#3 Brick Row Apartments</td>
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<td>#4 Under an Overpass</td>
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<tr>
<td>#5 RV</td>
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<tr>
<td>#6 Park Bench</td>
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<tr>
<td>#7 Bus Station</td>
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<tr>
<td>#8 Parked Car</td>
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<tr>
<td>#9 Downtown Bus</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#10 School Shelter</td>
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<tr>
<td>#11 Tent</td>
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<tr>
<td>#12 Train Car</td>
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<tr>
<td>#13 Bench</td>
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<tr>
<td>#14 Under a Bridge-Mattresses</td>
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<tr>
<td>#15 Sleeping in Car</td>
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<tr>
<td>#16 Subway Station</td>
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<td>#17 Semi-Truck</td>
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<tr>
<td>#18 Barn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#19 Youth Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>#20 Covered Park Picnic Area</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#21 Train Station</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#22 Under a Bridge - Tent</td>
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<td>#23 Mattress in Parking Lot</td>
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<tr>
<td>#24 Ronald McDonald House</td>
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<td>#25 Lake</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#26 Train Underpass</td>
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<td>#27 YMCA</td>
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<td>#28 Truck Stop</td>
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<tr>
<td>#29 Bridge Underpass</td>
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<tr>
<td>#30 Bar</td>
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## APPENDIX E

### CONNOTATIVE MEANING OF HOME PICTURE LIST

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONNOTATIVE PHOTOS IN ORDER</th>
<th>ANDREW</th>
<th>BECKY</th>
<th>CONSTANCE</th>
<th>DEVIN</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Everyday is a Struggle for Me</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2 Runaway &amp; Youth Services</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#3 Shopping Cart</td>
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<tr>
<td>#4 Homeless Youth Sign</td>
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<tr>
<td>#5 Dirty Feet</td>
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<tr>
<td>#6 Domestic Violence</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#7 Pawn Shop</td>
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<tr>
<td>#8 Laundry Facility</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#9 School</td>
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<tr>
<td>#10 Cigarette Store</td>
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<tr>
<td>#11 Alcohol</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>#12 American Red Cross</td>
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<td>#13 Cemetery</td>
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<td>#14 Kansas Food Bank</td>
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<td>#15 McDonalds</td>
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<tr>
<td>#16 Courthouse</td>
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<td>#17 Open Door Center</td>
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<td>#18 Trash Dumpsters</td>
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<td>#19 Disabled American Veterans</td>
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<td>#20 Church</td>
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<td>#21 Moving Truck</td>
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<td>#22 Animals</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>#23 Holidays and Special Days</td>
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<td>#24 Food Pantry</td>
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<td>#25 Goodwill Store</td>
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<tr>
<td>#26 Coupons</td>
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<td>#27 Salvation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>#28 Homeless and Hungry Sign</td>
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<td>#29 Foster/Adoptive Parent</td>
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<td>#30 Family Bicycling</td>
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APPENDIX F

JOURNAL RECORDING PROTOCOL

Department of Educational Leadership
Campus Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142

Ground Rules for Journal Recording,

You were given a journal to record any thoughts you have regarding your lived experience in writing or through pictures prior to this interview. This supplemental material of journal writing is strictly voluntary. All responses provided in this journal will be given credibility.

Before I begin I would like to share a few procedures. Although we will be on a first name basis today, no names will be used when I report the results of this journal recording. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. The journal recording will only be used for the purpose of understanding your lived experience. You will be given the original journal record back, and copies will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

You can refuse to write in this journal and/or withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawal will not result in any negative consequences for you. You have been provided a copy of the consent form that you signed. I have some extra copies if necessary.

Questions to ask student:
Do you have your journal today? If so, may I have it?
If the student does not have the journal, then ask....is there a reason why?
If the student does not have the journal, also ask....do you intend to write in it?
And if they wish to write in it, ask....When can I pick it up?