

**HOMELESSNESS AS IT IS PORTRAYED IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A  
VIEW FROM THE STREET**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

As educators, it is important for us to help our students become aware of social issues that affect their world. One such issue is homelessness. One way for teachers to incorporate this sensitive issue as a teachable topic is through children's literature. Literature is a powerful tool that affords students the opportunity to experience life on someone else's terms; that of the characters. The gritty reality of homelessness is explored in both picture books and novels. This paper addresses the way in which the topic of homelessness can be incorporated into the elementary school curriculum to support students' development in the area of social responsibility. Additionally, the paper includes an annotated bibliography of both picture books and novels on the topic of homelessness published between the years 1990 to 2007.

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background of the study

My fingers search the cardboard container, but I've finished the fries. I squirt ketchup on my fingers and lick it off. I'm never full. I think it was one of the reasons I had to leave, or, rather, my mother kicked me out. Jenna's a runaway, but I'm a throwaway. Tossed out. Like garbage. (Haworth-Attard, 2003 p. 12-13 )

Homelessness is a social issue that concerns all Canadian citizens both young and old. We see the homeless in the news, read about homelessness in newspapers and see the homeless in our own neighborhoods. It is no longer someone else's problem but rather a fact of life and a possibility for anyone. The plight of the homeless is a social issue that I am passionate about. I have always felt that this issue does not receive enough attention in our educational curriculum. As a teacher I have spent time teaching my students about the plight of the hungry, the poor, the orphaned and the effects that natural disasters can have on people. However, I have always wanted to incorporate homelessness into my teaching but was never sure how to do it. The following question haunted me: How could I humanize what it means or feels like to be homeless? My question was answered when I came across the novel *Theories of Relativity*, written by Barbara Haworth-Attard.

This fictionalized story delves into the harsh reality of homeless street youth. It tells the story of Dylan Wallace, a sixteen year old teenager, who is forced out of his home by his mother. Soon Dylan finds himself panhandling on the downtown streets that

become his new dwelling place. He tries to live a “normal life” on the streets but there is nothing “normal” about sleeping on cold pavement, scavenging for food in dumpsters, the constant chill, the dangerousness of the alleyways, and the hunger pains that never subside. The longer Dylan is on the streets the more he becomes the street. Barbara Haworth-Attard paints a hauntingly realistic portrait of what it means to be a street kid.

It was Barbara Haworth Attard’s author’s note written to her young readers that resonated with me. She states:

[I]t is important that you be aware of that kid on the street corner of a city street, the one with the outstretched hand. You will grow up to help run this country and will inherit the problem. We must all work toward a solution” (Haworth-Attard, 2003, p. 262).

After reading this novel I questioned how I could evoke interest and feelings of empathy about homelessness in my grade seven students. I also wondered how my students might benefit from examining what it means to be homeless, to live on the streets? I decided to investigate the issue of homelessness further.

One of my graduate elective classes *Trends and Issues in Children’s Literature* addressed societal issues that have found their way into current children’s literature, issues such as eating disorders, depression, suicide, sexuality and homelessness. These social issues have always been present, but it is only now that they are being openly researched and discussed. It seems that society is now prepared to tackle the “unpleasant” and authors of children’s literature are assisting this process. Homelessness is one of the complex issues that has received attention of late and authors are exposing the issues surrounding homelessness in their stories. This in turn allows educators the opportunity

to address homelessness with their students. Children encounter homelessness in many ways; on the streets, among their classmates, even in their own lives or the lives of people they know. We do not need to look far to see the many faces of homeless adults, seniors and youth living in our back alleys. Children's literature is one way for children to begin to understand and empathize with those who have lost their homes and who have to find their way living on the streets.

It is important to note that homelessness is a worldwide social phenomenon. Although largely an urban problem, those who are homeless (including large numbers of children) can be found in every region of the world from developing countries to the most affluent countries (YAPI, 2008). In order to survive, the homeless panhandle for money, steal, may become addicted to substances such as alcohol and drugs and they may prostitute themselves. Homeless children are generally malnourished and susceptible to disease. Many homeless children have been abandoned by their parents and, thus, forced to live on the streets. Other children run to the streets to escape abuse from family members. A Canadian statistic reported on a 2004 *Fifth Estate* documentary on homeless street children in Canada noted that on any given night, approximately 33,000 Canadians are homeless of which 8,335 to 11,000 are youth (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Fifth Estate* 2004). The homeless can be found in all Canadian cities and many towns. *The National Homeless Initiative*, the federal secretariat responsible for homelessness in Canada, estimated that there were approximately 150,000 homeless Canadians in 2005 (*Homeless Action Week*, 2005).

As with other *difficult* social problems, this contemporary issue is being tackled in children's literature. From the picture books for the young child to novels for the young

adult reader, authors are putting a face on homelessness. Authors such as Eric Walters, Barbara-Haworth Attard, Elizabeth Laird and Todd Strasser have chosen to write their stories about the desperate, gritty reality of living on the streets.

During my studies, I set out to not only find, but to read, as many current children's literature books written about homelessness. However, I also found that I was particularly interested in books that addressed homeless street youth. I searched for novels and picture books that addressed this issue. I wanted to find articles, books, reviews, research papers and lesson plans that would help me address this sensitive topic with my students. As I gathered information, I kept asking myself "how can I help educators address this difficult topic with their students in the classroom?"

This graduating paper, will address the following questions:

- In what ways can picture books and novels on homelessness support growth in children's social responsibility?
- What books (picture books and novels) are available which might support the topic of homelessness in an elementary school setting?

This study is grounded in a sociocognitive constructivist perspective on learning and development. A sociocognitive constructivist perspective on learning and development has its roots in the work of Vygotsky (sociocultural perspective) and Piaget (cognitive constructivist perspective). Both Vygotsky and Piaget believed that by using the physical and mental tools they are born with, children interact with their environment to make sense of it and in doing so they create their own knowledge. Thus, children are active participants in their acquisition of knowledge.



It is important to note that for Vygotsky both physical manipulation and social interaction are necessary components for learning and development and that learning and development is a collaborative process that takes place in the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) writes that the ZPD “is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Thus, children learn through interaction with peers and more able others (including the teacher) in the ZPD.

Current research stresses the importance of not only fostering children’s social responsibility but also heightening their social awareness with books that address current social issues that affect our world today through a critical literacy approach. In the article, *Heightening Children’s Social Awareness with Trade Books*, Katherine Moore claims “literature can inspire students to think critically about the human problems it exposes” (Moore, 1999, p.17). It is my hope that this paper will encourage other teachers to engage their students in open conversations about homelessness through the use of literature.

## SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section offers a review of theoretical perspectives and research findings relevant to this study. It is organized in two parts. Part one discusses fostering social responsibility in elementary students. Part two considers research on the role of critical literacy in supporting children's social awareness.

### **Fostering Social Responsibility**

Social responsibility can be defined as an ethical or ideological theory that an entity whether it is a government, corporation, organization or individual has a responsibility to society ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)). Socially responsible behavior cultivates individuals to think beyond themselves so that one is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors. An important aspect of social responsibility is making the world a better place by taking action against injustice simply because it is the right and human thing to do.

In schools across British Columbia social responsibility is part of the elementary school curriculum. It is not to be seen as a program, but rather as an embedded, integrated approach that ideally permeates an entire school community. The British Columbia Ministry of Education has developed the *British Columbia Social Responsibility Performance Standards* (2001) document. The framework for these performance standards was based on two years of field research which included analyzing national and international documents, examining BC curriculum and policy documents and consulting with advisory committees of which parents, technical experts and stakeholders were members (BC Performance Standards, 2001).

The Social Responsibility Framework is divided into four clusters that include kindergarten to grade 3, grades 4 to 5, grades 6 to 7 and grades 8 to 10. It is a tool that provides educators, students, and families with a common set of expectations for student development in four categories. The categories are titled “Contributing to the classroom and school community”, “Solving problems in peaceful ways”, “Valuing diversity” and “Defending human rights and exercising democratic rights and responsibilities” (BC Performance Standards, 2001, p. 4).

The hope is that students will develop into socially responsible individuals who show “community-mindedness” in their responses to school, local, national, and global issues and events (BC Performance Standards, 2001). Using the performance standards framework provides teachers with materials to evaluate student development and progress, according to grade level, anytime during the year. Teachers can assess student performance according to the following four levels:

- Not yet within expectations
- Meets expectations (minimal level)
- Fully meets expectations
- Exceeds expectations

Ultimately, the goal is for students to become responsible and active citizens that show a sense of community and a commitment to making the world a better place to live in.

As educators, we can promote our students’ growth in social responsibility by deepening their understanding of issues affecting their community and the world. Human and social development is one of the goals of the BC school system whereby students are expected to “develop a sense of social responsibility and a tolerance and

respect for the ideas and beliefs of others” (BC Performance Standards, 2001, p. 7). One way to achieve this goal is by teaching students about social issues such as homelessness through the use of children’s literature.

As educators we help our students make connections between what they are learning and how they are acting. Fostering social responsibility in our students, whether they are at the primary or intermediate level, is not the sole responsibility of the teacher or parent. In his article, *The Social Responsibility of the Writer* (1989), Milton Meltzer argues that children’s writers have a responsibility to create an early awareness of issues such as race, terrorism, poverty, and other disasters of human society. He suggests that if children learn to confront life as it is, they may learn to work toward making it better.

Being a socially responsible citizen allows students to make the changes they want to see in the world. Children have the ability to think critically about socially significant issues. Using a critical literacy approach in the classroom can help both primary students and young adolescents to examine their own values and their role in society. Social responsibility helps mould a child into being a good citizen of the world. Literature helps them to transform what they have read to make connections to their personal experiences, other stories and the world around them. An integral part of good citizenship is the ability to be critically literate about the world we live in.

### **A Place for Critical Literacy**

Children’s books about social issues, such as homelessness, offer endless opportunities to support critical literacy. Critical literacy is an instructional approach that encourages readers to actively analyze texts by adopting a critical and questioning stance toward changing themselves and their worlds. Students engage in a critical discussion of

"texts," which can include television, movies, web pages, music, art and other means of expression. The importance of critical literacy is for teachers to help students discuss the different meanings a text can have and how to think flexibly about it. While literacy enables students to make meaning from texts, critical literacy incorporates critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world. (McDaniel, 2004).

Critical literacy practice is rooted in the social justice pedagogy of Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. Such an approach suggests that in the classroom, the role of teacher and student should be redefined so that students are not treated as passive receptacles of information. Instead, teachers should encourage students to question the world they live in (McDaniel, 2004).

By employing a critical literacy approach to reading, teachers can introduce realistic children's literature on homelessness to foster sustained and meaningful conversations about the issue. According to McLaughlin, a professor of literacy studies at the University of Pennsylvania, critical literacy is "not only a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life as we know it" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 52). In the article *Critical Literacy, the right answer for the reading classroom*, Kellie Molden suggests that critical literacy also promotes transformation and action in the reader. Critical literacy encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process by questioning, disputing and examining power relationships (2004). Examining the power relationships in our society, whether it is government officials or the disparity among social classes, allows for a deeper understanding of the text and the social issues it addresses. Implementation of this

approach helps students grapple with the many facets of homelessness; including malnutrition, violence, addiction, abuse, death and survival.

Critical literacy is a developmental process that begins with practice and reflection. It involves understanding how children make meaning of what they have read. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) describes reading as a transaction between the text and the reader. Rosenblatt notes that readers take on a certain stance toward the material they are reading. The two stances are referred to as “efferent” and “aesthetic” reading. Efferent reading deals with facts and information that the reader can take away from the text. Aesthetic reading is a more emotional perspective about “living through” the experience. Students who read books about social issues are reading from both an efferent and aesthetic stance. However, Rosenblatt (2002) notes that reading is not entirely efferent or entirely aesthetic. She believes that readers also read from a third stance, which is referred to as the critical stance. When reading from a critical stance, readers use their background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text. Reading from a critical stance is a natural occurrence that extends beyond the classroom to everyday life experiences (Molden, 2004). In other words, children respond to stories in ways that reflect his or her past experiences. Books that deal with social issues allow students to live through and share in the experience of the protagonist. It also enables students to analyze and evaluate what they have read. An example of how one reads from a critical stance can be taken from the novel *Can't Get There From Here*. In this novel, Maybe, a young teenager, struggles to survive on the streets of New York after having been thrown out of her home by her abusive mother. Maybe talks about living on the streets as being:

[A] pain from inside. The pain of this cold, hungry dirty life where nobody cared whether you lived or died. Where you were not even a name. Not even a number. Just some flesh clinging to some bones. Waiting to eat or not eat. To sleep or not sleep. To live or not live. (Strasser, 2004, p. 25)

Readers of social issues, such as homelessness, become text critics and comprehend information from a critical stance as naturally as they comprehend from the aesthetic and efferent reading perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

An American study revealed the ways in which a group of children understood the issue of poverty. Sixty-two eight-year-old children of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, genders and geographic settings read the picture book *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* (Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pommeroy, 2007). The children were asked to respond to this particular critical literacy text through drawing and talking. Data analysis of the children's drawing identified that children of higher socioeconomic status were more likely than those of lower socioeconomic status to convey the positive look of poverty. These drawings exhibited a lack of awareness of what it means to be poor. With the verbal task, black or biracial children communicated the negative look of poverty and an awareness of people living in poverty (Chafel et al., 2007, p.75). This study illustrates the importance of using critical literacy texts to elicit the richness of children's thinking about issues such as poverty. Social awareness about social issues stems from students constructing meaning from texts by connecting the information they read to things they know about and the conversations that happen in the classroom (Lobron & Selman, 2007).

The focus of a critical literacy approach is to not only elicit serious discussion amongst students but also to promote transformation that will bring about social change. Teachers need to give students the opportunity to express themselves and weave life experiences into learning, while addressing issues of social justice, equity, and diversity (Chafel et al., 2007, p. 74). In his article, *Teaching for Critical Literacy in Social Studies*, Steven Wolk suggests that educators do not need to tell students what to think when reading texts about social issues. Rather, it is important to empower our students to think for themselves by taking action through inquiry and dialogue about how to live so that they help make a better world (2003). Hilton Smith argues that it is not merely enough to read about critical literacy but teachers need to be committed to nurturing critical literacy and make it a regular part of students' classroom activity. It is vital for our students, especially when dealing with social issues, to engage in a critique of society and the world. By teaching critical literacy, as part of our curriculum, we allow students to be empowered to act and make the changes they want to see in the world (Wolk, 2003). Fehring & Green (2001) sum up the value of critical literacy by saying, "critical literacy has the potential to give students the opportunity to read the word so that they can read the world" (p. 56).

### **Summary**

For our students to be fully prepared to participate as active contributing members of our society students, beginning from kindergarten to Grade 7, need to learn to be responsible for themselves, others and the world they are living in. Social responsibility is not only about following rules or learning to cooperate with others; it is also about showing interest in making the world a better place by defending human rights and



solving problems in peaceful ways. In order for students to empathize with the plight of the homelessness they need to be exposed to it. Stories, whether in novel or picture format, allow children to enter the world of the homeless even if it is just for a short time. As with many texts, picture books and novels contain multiple layers of meaning. Teacher's can channel children's responses to literature about homelessness by using a critical literacy approach that enables students to deconstruct the text they are reading.

In a critical literacy classroom the emphasis is placed on students' constructing meaning from the texts they are reading. As students read about homelessness, they can reflect, question and construct their own meaning. The value in this approach is that students will develop critical perspectives about the homeless. A critical literacy approach promotes transformation, reflection and action. Our students will be able to read the world around them and want to take a stance to initiate changes for those who are homeless. Using the social responsibility framework and employing a critical literacy approach in the classroom enables our students to be more cognizant of societal issues. It can also motivate them to act in ways that help create a better world.

### SECTION 3: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

Acquainting students with literature about homelessness serves a dual purpose. First, it allows students to hopefully move from an egocentric sense of self to developing a growing sense of altruism for humanity. Secondly, the intent is that students will then be propelled to bring about a call to social action to speak for the voiceless in society. Students can work together to make even small differences in the quest for solutions to homelessness. Classroom activities such as collecting food donations for food banks, donating old clothes or toys to local organizations or writing letters to members of Parliament demonstrate socially responsible behavior. This teaches students values, respect and concern for others. It also invites them to broaden their perspective to consider homelessness, not only as a national, but global issue and concern that needs attention.

Literature is a powerful tool that can help students appreciate, reflect on and understand the complexity of social issues through children's realistic fiction. Nancy L. Hadaway, a professor of literacy studies in Texas, writes about the power of literature in her research about breaking boundaries with global literature. She states:

[T]he power of literature is immeasurable. Good books help readers understand who they are and where they belong in the world. What is more, they open doors in the mind and in the heart. (Hadaway & McKeena, 2007, p. 9)

We want our students' hearts to be open so they can show compassion for the plight of others. They need to be the change that is necessary in the world to help solve socially significant issues such as homelessness. Reading realistic stories about people living on the streets and their struggles represents the stark reality of today's world. Humanizing

homelessness, by exposing students to stories about it, makes it less abstract and easier for students to empathize with. The hope is that students will show a sense of commitment to making the world a better place through positive actions.

Stories about the kids living on the streets and their struggles, although fictional, represent stark realities of the world. Yvonne Siu-Runyan, a professor of literacy studies at the University of Colorado, writes about the power of stories. She suggests:

[S]tories are important because they are a part of how people make sense of themselves and the world around them. Stories are people, just as people are stories; that is, when we read or hear stories, we learn about and deepen our understanding about others and self” (Hadaway & McKenna, 2007, p. xviii).

Reading about others’ stories can stretch the minds of our students to move beyond the boundaries of their everyday world.

Reading realistic fiction can elicit different responses from students depending on their race, background and socioeconomic status. Realistic fiction refers to works of fiction that help explain today’s people, problems and places. It is a popular genre among young readers because the writing often mirrors their own lives and introduces characters that reveal different ways of living and thinking. Contemporary realistic fiction examines humans facing and overcoming the challenges of living today (Jacobs & Tunnell, 1996). Responding to picture books such as *Way Home*, *The Lady in a Box*, *An Angel for Solomon Singer* and novels such as *Runnerland*, *Sketches*, *Shattered*, and *Stone Cold* allows students to engage in critical dialogues and discussions in the classroom. It involves more than just answering questions from comprehension work sheets. Students need and want more than a diet of worksheets and rote skills that ask them to think little

and talk less. Literacy skills such as predicting, summarizing, synthesizing and drawing inferences when reading are used to get to the heart of the issue. Raising questions about whose voices are represented in the text, whose voices are missing, and who gains and who loses by the reading of the text helps readers understand the text's purpose. To heighten children's understanding of homelessness teachers can select literary texts and instructional activities that will expand students' awareness of socially significant issues.

Research shows the impact that a critical literacy approach has with elementary students. Employing this approach enables teachers to introduce realistic children's literature to foster sustained and meaningful conversations with their students about issues affecting our society (Pomeroy, Hammel, Flint, & Chafel, 2007). Teachers want to elicit more than "yes" or "no" responses to the stories they share with their students. Some questions that teachers can pose to their students to get more than a "yes" or "no" response are as follows:

- How characters and situations are portrayed: "Who do you like in the story?" "Who is always in the background in this story?" or "Which people don't you hear in the story, and what might they say if you heard them?"
- How is information presented: "Are there other ways to show this person/place/event?"
- What stance does the text take: "What do you think the writer wants readers to think?"
- What is the readers' response to the text: "What did you notice about this story?" or "How does this make you feel?" (Apol, 1998 p. 36-37).

## Book Selection

To support teachers who wish to tackle the topic of homelessness with their students I have compiled a recommended booklist on the topic. During my studies, I set out to find as many current children's literature books written about homelessness. The following is a recommended list of existing children's fictional literature, including picture books and novels, about homeless people. The list was compiled through searches of databases, public libraries, booklists and Internet sites. Additional information came from books and journals concerned with children's literature, such as *The Horn Book Magazine*, *Breaking Boundaries with Global Literature*, *Resource Links*, *Scholastic Canada* and *Children's Literature Briefly*. Concurrently, I also contacted librarians, bookstores and experts on children's literature such as Dr. Ronald Jobe for names of additional children's books in which homelessness is portrayed.

These books are appropriate for use with students from kindergarten to Grade 7 (the grade level for which each book is appropriate is listed). It is important for teachers to have a wide range of reading materials available for their students to support a study about homelessness. Teachers can use these books as class read alouds, independent novel studies, class novel studies or for literature circles. Librarians can use the books for research projects or as part of a 'Homeless Awareness' kit that students can borrow to read on their own or use for study in the library. The books can also be used solely for individual classroom use or part of school activities that would culminate with a community service project to help homeless people. Books about homelessness support many social studies concepts such as family, identity, cultures, societies, communities and social problems. The criteria used to select the books for this recommended booklist

is adapted from Deborah Hodge's "Top Ten Qualities of a Great Information Book for Kids." Many features identified by Hodge (2006) are ideal for identifying quality books on the topic of homelessness. The adapted criteria are as follows:

- Lively writing that holds a young reader's interest
- Writing that is clear and concise
- Visually appealing art or photographs that capture reader's interest
- Visuals that enhance, extend and complement the text
- Plot and details that allow readers to make connections between the story and their own experience
- All of the elements of the book come together in a compelling way
- A seamless interplay of art and text
- Is written appropriately for the intended audience
- The story portrays a real-life situation
- The story can be used with students from kindergarten to Grade 7
- The novel or picture book was published between the years 1990 and 2007

I have read each of these books, supplied a brief summary and listed other issues that occur alongside homelessness.

### Recommended Books on Homelessness

Bunting, Eve. (1991). *Fly away home*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

“My dad and I live in an airport...the airport is better than the streets”. A little boy and his father move from terminal to terminal trying to go unnoticed in a busy airport.

**Issues:** family, faith, hope, love, poverty, shelter and forgiveness (picture book).

**Grades:** K-3

Bunting, Eve. (1997). *December*. San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace & Co.

“My mama and I live in a house we made ourselves. There’s black printing on the walls and floor”. On Christmas Eve, Simon and his mother share their small cardboard box home with a stranger and Simon offers the old woman one of his Christmas cookies. Soon enough their luck begins to change.

**Issues:** homelessness, charity, friendship, family, love and hope.

**Grades:** K-3

Burns, John. (2007). *Runnerland*. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books.

Peter Weir, a fourteen-year-old teenager, runs away from home after his father’s death. Feeling like nobody understands him; not even his mother, Peter leaves his home and begins a new life on the streets.

**Issues:** street kids/homelessness, family, death, survival, friendship and love (novel).

**Grades:** 6+

Cooley, Beth. (2006). *Shelter*. New York, NY: Random House.

After her father’s death and the discovery of his debts, Lucy moves with her mother and her brother from their upper-middle-class neighbourhood into a homeless shelter where she tries to come to terms with her new life.

**Issues:** death, family, homeless shelters, highschool, friendship, family, love, compassion, forgiveness (novel).

**Grades:** 4-6

Draanen, Wendelin V. (2006). *Runaway*. New York, NY: Laurel Leaf

Holly has had enough of foster homes. Within a span of two years, Holly has lived in five different foster homes. Now that she is twelve, she decides to run away and live her life on the streets (novel).

**Issues:** homelessness, emotional abuse, violence, addictions, death, orphans and foster homes.

**Grades:** 6-7

DiSalvo-Ryan, A. (1991). *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen*. New York, NY: Morrow Junior Books.

“Sometimes people need help”, says Uncle Willie. A young boy spends the day with his Uncle Willie, who works in a soup kitchen, and helps out with the work of feeding homeless people in his neighbourhood.

**Issues:** soup kitchens, family, compassion, hunger, homelessness, love and help (picture book).

**Grades:** K-3

Gioria, Carmi. (2003). *A Circle of Friends*. New York, NY: Star Bright Books

A little boy shares his snack with a homeless man and begins a cycle of good will.

**Issues:** homelessness, sharing, kindness, friendship, giving.

**Grades:** K-2

Gunning, Monica. (2004). *A Shelter in Our Car*. New York, NY: Children’s Book Press.

“We sink between the clothes on the back seat of the car. “Mama, it’s creepy sleeping in our car”, I whisper”. After the death of her father, Zettie and her mother flee Jamaica to find a better life in America. However, when Zettie’s mom is unable to find work they end up living out of their car.

**Issues:** death, survival, homelessness, family, love, fear, compassion.

**Grades:** K-3

Hathorn, Libby. (1994). *Way Home*. North Sydney, NSW: Random House

Shane finds a no-name stray cat and takes it through the dangers of the city to his home, the corner of an alley.

**Issues:** street kids, fear, survival and friendship (Picture book).

**Grades:** 1-7

Haworth-Attard, Barbara. (2003). *The Theories of Relativity*. Toronto, Ontario: Harper Trophy Canada.

Dylan Wallace, a sixteen year old teenager, is forced out of his home by his mother. Soon enough Dylan finds himself panhandling on the downtown streets that become his new dwelling place. He tries to lead a “normal” life on the streets but there is nothing “normal” about sleeping on cold pavement, scavenging for food in dumpsters, the constant chill of bones, the dangerousness of the alleyways and the hunger pains that never subside.

**Issues:** street kids/homelessness, addictions, family, violence and abuse, social services, survival, friendship, love, parenting (novel).

**Grades:** 7+



Herrick, Steven. (2000). *The Simple Gift: A Novel*. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.

Billie decides to pack up his belongings and leave home. No longer able to live with his alcoholic and abusive father, Billie finds a home in an abandoned freight train.

**Issues:** street kids, abuse, violence, addictions, family, friendship, love, and survival (novel).

**Grades:** 7+

King, Stephen Michael. (2004). *Mutt Dog!* Toronto, Ontario: Harcourt, Inc.

“Mutt Dog is brave and fast and gentle and loyal and smart, but he’s also hungry and lonely and he doesn’t have a home”. Every night a little stray dog searches for a new place to sleep and eat. One evening he follows a lady to a homeless shelter for humans and befriends one of the workers. The woman takes him home and now he knows where he belongs. A wonderful friendship begins with his new family.

**Issues:** friendship, homeless shelters and loneliness (picture book).

**Grades:** K-3

Laird, Elizabeth. (2003). *The Garbage King*. New Wharf Road, London: Macmillan Children’s Books.

“What are they? Only godana. Street kids, he thought contemptuously. He’d never imagined it would come to this. This was as low as you could go. There was nowhere to go from here”. Mamo, who comes from a poor family, is sold as a slave to a farmer after his mother’s death. Dani, who comes from a rich family, fears his father and his constant verbal abuse. Both boys escape their situations, meet up and become part of a street gang where they must work together in order to survive.

**Issues:** street kids, poverty, child-labour, abuse, family relations, survival, Ethiopia (novel).

**Grades:** 5+

Mc-Govern, Ann. (1997). *The Lady in the Box*. New York, NY: Turtle Books.

When Lizzie and Ben discover a homeless lady living in their neighbourhood, they decide to help out. They bring Dorrie, “the lady in the box” who keeps her “home” over the heating grate, food and clothing.

**Issues:** poverty, the elderly, faith and family relationships (picture book).

**Grades:** 1-4

McPhail, David. (2002). *The Teddy Bear*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

A teddy bear, lost by the boy who loves him, still feels loved after being rescued by a homeless man.

**Issues:** fear, poverty, homeless people, friendship, compassion, love (picture book).

**Grades:** K-3

Naidoo, Beverley. (1995). *No Turning Back*. London, England: Penguin Group.

“He should have put on two sweaters. But he hadn’t really been thinking clearly for the last few days. Ever since the last beating. He didn’t know whether to forgive Ma or not. If she didn’t want him nearly killed, why did she complain so much about him to his stepfather?” Twelve-year old Sipho runs away to the streets of Johannesburg to escape his abusive stepfather.

**Issues:** street kids, homelessness, abuse, violence, family, friendship, survival, South Africa (novel).

**Grades:** 4-7

Rylant, Cynthia. (1992). *An Angel for Solomon Singer*. New York, NY: Orchard Paperbacks.

Solomon Singer is a middle-aged man who lives in a hotel for men in New York City. One night he wanders into a restaurant where he reads these words on the menu: “The Westway Cafe -- where all your dreams come true”. A waiter named Angel welcomes him and invites him back. Each night Singer returns wishing for the things he remembers from his Indiana boyhood.

**Issues:** friendship, poverty, hunger, compassion, faith and love (picture book).

**Grades:** 1-3

Standerline, Joe., & Swindells, Robert. (1999). *Stone Cold*. New York, NY: Nelson Thornes.

A boy named Link finds himself on the streets in London after fleeing his evil stepfather. It is written in a play format.

**Issues:** street kids, homelessness, violence, fear, friendship, hope (novel).

**Grades:** 6+

Strasser, Tod. (2004). *Can’t Get There From Here*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.

Maybe, a young teenager, struggles to survive on the streets of New York after having been thrown out of her home by her abusive mother. Staying alive is an everyday struggle for Maybe and the other homeless teens she befriends.

**Issues:** homeless teens, violence, malnutrition, addiction, abuse, death, friendship and survival (novel).

**Grades:** 7+

Testa, Maria. (1996). *Someplace To Go*. Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company.

Davey, his mother and older brother live in a shelter and eat at a soup-kitchen. After-school hours are challenging for Davey; he passes the time at a neighborhood supermarket, the public library, and walking the streets until the soup kitchen opens. His home situation goes unnoticed by his classmates.

**Issues:** homelessness, fear, shelter, soup kitchen, faith and family (picture book).

**Grades:** 1-5

Upjohn, Rebecca. (2007). *Lily and the Paper Man*. Toronto, Ontario: Second Story Press.

Walking with her mother on the way from school one day, a little girl named Lily, spots an elderly homeless man shivering from the cold. She decides to help the elderly man by gathering clothes together so that he can keep warm.

**Issues:** elderly, homelessness, empathy, compassion, love and friendship (picture book).

**Grades:** K-4

Voigt, Cynthia. (2002). *Homecoming*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.

"The woman put her sad moon-face in at the window of the car. "You be good", she said. "You hear me? You little ones, mind what Dicey tells you. You hear?" The Tillerman-kids' mother leaves them one day in a car in a mall parking lot. It was up to thirteen-year-old Dicey, the eldest of four, to take care of everything, make all the decisions, feed, find places to sleep. She had to make sure to avoid the authorities who could place the children in foster homes. With little money and hardly any food the siblings have to work together in order to survive.

**Issues:** abandonment, survival, fear, loss and family relationships, love (novel).

**Grades:** 4-7

Walters, Eric. (2006). *Shattered*. Toronto, Ontario: Viking Canada.

Fifteen-year old Ian must complete community volunteer service in order to pass social studies. He decides to work at a soup kitchen for the homeless where he meets a homeless man, named Jacques, who changes the way he views humanity. Jacques, a former soldier in the Canadian Armed forces, also shares with Ian the horrors of the Rwandan genocide.

**Issues:** volunteering, soup kitchens, elderly, Canadian soldiers, Rwandan genocide, war, forgiveness, love, compassion, violence, poverty, addictions (novel).

**Grades:** 5+

Walters, Eric. (2007). *Sketches*. Toronto, Canada: Penguin Group.

“The first night on my own was scary. I stayed awake for most of it, drifted off for a while in a booth at an all-night doughnut shop, and finally fell asleep in a corner of the bus station, hidden behind some lockers. Nobody noticed me there. It was like I was invisible”. After fleeing her suburban home, 15-year-old Dana struggles to survive in the alleys, squats, and subway stations of downtown Toronto. Dana and her two friends, seasoned street kids Brent and Ashley, must contend with the daily battle of life on the street.

**Issues:** street kids, shelters, family, friendship, violence, poverty, dreams, hunger, crime, art (novel).

**Grades:** 6+

## **SECTION 4: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This graduating paper began with the following two questions:

- In what ways can picture books and novels on homelessness support growth in children's social responsibility?
- What books (picture books and novels) are available which might support the topic of homelessness in an elementary school setting?

I discovered that through a critical literacy approach to reading, that is, reading texts that engage the reader to think critically about, and come to new understandings of, socially significant content; teachers can raise children's awareness of social issues. Students work closely with the text to question, debate and dispute what they have read about homelessness. They then can engage in a critique of the world and their role in society to promote social justice.

It can be argued that picture books and novels on homelessness supports growth in children's social responsibility. These stories have the potential to inspire students to understand that being a socially responsible citizen means taking social action against social inequalities and injustices in our world. Reading and discussing the various stories teaches students to be more understanding, tolerant and respectful about the reality of homeless adults and children. Our students will then feel empowered to be of service in their own communities. These stories expose our students to real-life situations in which the fictional characters might be ones with whom students may identify and whose emotions they can share vicariously. They will hopefully become more empathetic and compassionate about people who live on the streets as they read through different stories. Finally, we can create a sense of hope when reading books about homelessness by

focusing on social action and effective interventions. Students can engage in social action projects aimed at making a real difference in the lives of others'. It is important for our students to know that change is possible; that children can make a difference. Students can take proactive measures such as informing other students, the school, parents and the community about what they have learned. School wide projects such as collecting canned food, writing letters of concern to members of Parliament and collecting used clothing items or toys are all positive steps that instill hope. Children need to see the affect they can have on others. By reading and responding to these books, students can work through the social issue of homelessness as a classroom community.

In particular, a critical literacy approach to reading, that is, reading texts that engage the reader to think critically about, and come to new understandings of, socially significant content, teachers can raise children's awareness of social issues. Students work closely with the text to question, debate and dispute what they have read about homelessness. They then can engage in a critique of the world and their role in society to promote social justice.

In answer to my first question, therefore, it is clear that picture books and novels on homelessness can definitely support growth in children's social responsibility. However, it is important to note that the books chosen to support children's understanding of difficult topics, such as homelessness, should be of an excellent quality. By adapting and using Deborah Hodges criteria (*Top Ten Qualities of a Great Information book for kids*) I was able to identify a recommended booklist of both picture books and novels suitable for elementary students.

The intent of this paper was to introduce the topic of homelessness as a way of helping students become empathetic and to develop social consciousness. It is suggested that reading books about homelessness exposes children to real-life situations that enable them to make personal connections and develop understanding of the difficulties *others* face particularly those who are homeless.

The picture books and novels listed encourage readers to function as both *participant* and *spectator* that are, moving about in a fictional world that allows for both distance and intimacy to the social issue being taught. Using books in the classroom that speak to homelessness enhances students' thinking and discussion of social issues. It is also a way of bringing the outside world in. Hopefully, through such stories students will become more aware of homelessness and be inspired to take action to ameliorate this desperate problem.

This paper is meant as a resource for teachers and teacher librarians to help them open dialogue about homelessness with their students. We are not able to make a difference in the world if the students we teach do not know how homelessness affects lives on a daily basis. Our students, for the most part, are sheltered from the outside world. Their only real exposure to homelessness is via what they see on television, read in newspapers or hear from their parents. Often homeless people are stereotyped as lazy and lacking the initiative to get off of the streets. This stereotype only serves to perpetuate the problem. It is vital that we demystify this stereotype. We can begin this process by reading stories about homelessness and having candid conversations about the causes of homelessness. Our students need to know the facts and read the stories of the homeless so that they can make a difference in the world.

As Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian philosopher internationally esteemed for his doctrine of non-violent protest, stated, “be the change you want to see in the world” (Mahatma Gandhi Quotes, 2008). Empowering our children to make change will give a voice to the silent sorrow of homelessness.



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