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The power of space: constructing a dialog of resistance, transformation, and homelessness

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Introduction

Homelessness is an economic condition. Its sources are poverty and a shortage of affordable housing. The rapid globalization of economic oppression intensifies the problems of new poverty and creates homelessness, globally and in the United States. Speaking to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (April, 2001[1]), Miloon Kothari described the impact of globalization on world housing. Kothari argued that globalization exacerbates the widening gap between income groups, within and across countries, and results in an increase in the number of people in inadequate and insecure housing and living conditions on a global scale. In his United Nations address, Kothari implored his audience of nations to consider the forms of distressed housing conditions found throughout the world, which include: “slums, squatter settlements, old buses, shipping containers, pavements, railway platforms, streets and roadside embankments, cellars, staircases, rooftops, elevator enclosures, cardboard boxes, plastic sheets, aluminum and tin shelters.” Homelessness and distressed living conditions are not limited to underdeveloped and economically unstable nations; rather, being without adequate shelter is a situation that thrives in the United States and in other economically wealthy nations. In the United States, today, each of the distressed housing conditions Kothari referenced is in use as shelter, testimony to the globalization of homelessness, even in wealthy nations.

Homelessness is also a social condition. In the United States, it reflects failed policy with regard to education, housing, health, welfare, crime, and drugs. As noted by Henry Giroux in his article in this issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (*QSE*), the United States ranks first in military technology and military exports, but ranks only 17th in its efforts to lift children out of poverty and 23rd in infant mortality. While it is the number one nation for housing millionaires and billionaires, 1.4 million children are homeless in the United States in any given year, and the number of homeless children in America is steadily going up. “In short,” writes Giroux, “economically, politically and culturally, the situation of youth in the United States is intolerable and unforgivable.”

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While recognizing the globalization of homelessness and its impact on people worldwide, in this special issue of *QSE* several of our authors have contributed action research that has taken place in a variety of distressed housing alternatives within the United States. Susan Finley's article takes readers into squats, doorways, and tent villages; Angela Calabrese Barton brings science education to a homeless shelter in New York City; Margery Osborne and her colleagues transport readers into the seasonal shelters of migrant worker children; Lisa Schiff works among San Francisco area service providers to homeless people; and Lisa Cary situates her readers in female juvenile detention. Photographs by Toby Hardman, Craig Pozzi, and David Yates provide aesthetic glimpses into lives and worlds of "houseless" people. These authors and artists illustrate the physical reality of people living without goods and services, while they also challenge readers to experience the power of the places people have chosen or made their own.

Thus, the purpose of this special issue is threefold: (1) to challenge standard conceptions of homelessness in order to open up new ways of understanding how and why homelessness proliferates in Western society; (2) to demonstrate the power of place in the lives of unhoused individuals in their (and our) efforts to imagine new social relations and ways of being in a world understood and described primarily by the kinds of material and social capital not afforded to those in homeless situations; and (3) to share stories of lives in distressed housing in multiple forms as a way to increase the possibility of bringing the lives of homeless individuals into the core of our conversations in educational research.

Challenging conceptions of homelessness

Researchers in this issue offer readers alternative conceptualizations of "home" and "homelessness." Osborne writes:

> The word home, to many people in the United States, is a symbol of freedom, choice, and power. It is a physical place that one shapes the way one wants, reflecting the "inner" person, and where individuals can act like they choose without pretense or role-playing. Often home signifies a commodity, an object of monetary value that reflects the owner's value. To others, however, home is a conceptual or an emotional space used to represent relationships. We believe migrant workers . . . [think] of home in terms synonymous with the word family where it suggests a conceptual space which defines roles and relationships. Home in this sense is not a creation that reflects individuality but an institution that shapes the identities of those within it.

Deconstructing definitions of home and explicating the role of definitions as they appear in relation to information practices in the field of homeless services is the primary theme of the article included here by Lisa Schiff. In her article, Schiff reveals the manifold ways in which, as a society, we accommodate ourselves to definitions through information practices that are comfortable and simple in how they situate homelessness as a larger social issue. She discusses, for instance, the criminalization of homelessness through discourse, primarily by newspapers, radio broadcasts and television shows that inaccurately describe the causes and conditions of homelessness.

Several authors in this issue join Schiff in attempting to debunk the stereotypes that exist about homelessness, as well as pointing out false narratives about homelessness. For instance, Finley makes the point that despite excoriations from passers-by to "get a job" heard by panhandlers and people queued at mission soup kitchens, many homeless people do work – frequently they are employed either full or part time in one or more minimum-wage jobs, but their earnings are not sufficient to maintain food, housing, and other essentials for themselves and their families.

Indeed, economic recession is most threatening to those individuals who have become recently employed, thus increasing the likelihood of episodic homelessness. Although drug addicts and psychotics have been frequently portrayed and stereotyped as the images of homelessness, stagnating wages, poverty and the lack of affordable housing are likely causes for the increase in families with children who are now one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. society who are homeless. In 1997, 84% of "welfare" families in private unsubsidized housing received less in benefits than they paid for housing and food. Even those people who transitioned from welfare to work were unable to afford housing after they began working. Currently, over one million U.S. families have applied for public housing and face an average wait of three years before their housing needs will be met. There is no state or local jurisdiction in the country where minimum wage income can afford HUD's fair market rents for housing. Challenging homelessness requires first that researchers, educators, and policy makers get past stereotypes of homeless people and the tendency to categorize homeless individuals as "derelict" or "deficient" that undergirds failing public policy in order to consider the many different faces of homelessness.

Imagining new ways of being, living, and constructing space

Schools and schooling have long been considered by popular opinion as "the road out of poverty" or the "place" where youth can find equitable opportunities to succeed in society. Yet, among the complexities of global economic crisis are the myriad educational issues having to do with inadequate food and housing for children and adults. For educators, homelessness brings with it issues of school transience, disengagement, school leaving, hunger among schoolchildren, adequacy of preschool preparation, the integration of children living in poverty, the provision of resources to help children catch up with missed work during moves between schools, and the efforts toward social apartheid wrought by initiatives such as separate schools for homeless children.

Calabrese Barton takes up this challenge in her article on science education as contested terrain. At the crux of her argument is the idea that schooling and school success is not measured or created by meaningful learning but by youths' abilities to measure up against a homogenous yardstick of content standards and behavioral objectives. By telling the stories of one homeless teenage boy, Calabrese Barton suggests that only by embracing the landscapes and disjunctures of youths' lives and its impact on how youth participate in the academic subjects of schooling can we better understand how youths' lives make *un*harmonious the assumptions embedded in what it means to be successful in school.

Children, youths, adults, and families who live in homeless situations are unequal members of our so-called "democratic society". Children are scapegoated by their peers and their teachers for being different, for daring to reflect that which our highly resourced and well-financed society works to hide. Lacking resources, such as school supplies, permanent addresses, opportunities to study, to rest or to clean, all of which are expected, and indeed, demanded, by those in schools and in the labor force, homeless children, youths, and adults are faulted for global society's failings. Education is not, generally, socially just, nor does it situate learning in the experiences of youth living in urban poverty. Calabrese Barton addresses the need for culturally responsive science practice and science education in her *QSE* article, where she demonstrates that making sense of youths' lived experiences with science opens implications of understanding both youths lives and science education as contested terrain for school science reform policies and practices in poor, urban settings.

Lisa Cary also challenges our understanding of homelessness and space and how our global society constructs meaning about spaces of deviance. In her contribution, she shows us how girls inhabiting the deviant subject position of juvenile female offenders have "no home in normalized total social institutions." Through critical discourse analysis of the language we use to describe home and normality along with deviant historiography, Cary highlights the im/possibility of "home" – the "unhomely spaces" of the social institutions catering to these girls and the homelessness of the deviant girl within and against the hegemonic discourses.

Deviance and space plays out again for the residents of Dignity Village (Finley, included in this issue), who have demonstrated that the potential for the very poor and the unhoused to live in a democratic society can only be realized if homeless people recapture primary control over their own lives. Village residents have discovered for themselves that "democracy encourages all citizens to actively construct and share power over institutions that govern their lives" (Giroux, 1993, p. 13). In this instance, Villagers have created a self-governed tent community that has centered a society on the notions of care and tolerance. Residents of Dignity Village live in their own constructed center for democracy based in community responsibility, respect, compassion, and love, both for people and the environment. Their social experiment is reflected in the architecture and aesthetics of their individual and community housing. Says one of Dignity's residents, "we are no longer homeless, and we're not unhoused. We don't know quite what to call ourselves anymore, other than alternative." Building their own, democratic and ecologically sustainable community has brought their determination for self-sufficiency into a model community that can be the basis for rethinking the politics of poverty in America.

The power and importance of sharing stories

Finally, each of the manuscripts presented in this issue, along with the photographs and illustrations, is deeply rooted in stories. Stories – whether they be the narrative inquiry into the life of a homeless teen as presented in Calabrese Barton's article, the theoretical and practical deconstruction of the uses and meanings of homelessness in contemporary discourse as presented in Shiff's article, or images

of reclaimed spaces as captured in the photographs of Hardman, Yates, Bureker and Pozzi – are powerful research tools. They provide us with deeply contextual insights that challenge complacency in what and how we might make sense of homelessness.

For example, in this theme issue we include portraits, as well as photographs of street art and some of the alternative housing structures Kothari described in his United Nations appeal for attention to the global need for adequate housing for all people. Although homelessness is a complex social problem that takes place in a global context, in this issue of *QSE*, through story, we put faces to the homeless among us. Our purpose is to remove the cloak of "invisibility" that unhoused people find around them.

Note

1. Available at http://r0.unctad.org/conference/address/unhrcomm17_e.htm

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