

Spaces and places:

Examining education in the diverse contexts of poverty, homelessness, and mobility

by

Alexandra E. Pavlakis

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The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Peter M. Miller, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

Carolyn J. Kelley, Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

John B. Diamond, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

Madeline Hafner, Associate Scientist, WCER/Education

Richard R. Halverson, Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

Bianca Baldrige, Assistant Professor, Educational Policy Studies

ABSTRACT

This three-paper dissertation highlights the heterogeneity of student and family homelessness. In particular, it emphasizes the ways in which residential space (such as shelter, doubling up with friends, or living in independent accommodations) and geographic place (such as urban or suburban areas) shape educational opportunities and experiences for homeless and highly mobile (HHM) students and families. Chapter 1 overviews the literature on HHM students and families, provides a rationale for the three-paper format, and presents my positionality. Chapter 2 examines how families who are impacted by both the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and federal rehousing policies (such as the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act) experience schooling in an urban district. It argues that in a number of ways, how rehousing policies and education policies interact molds HHM students and families' social networks, access to resources, and ultimately, their opportunities to thrive. Chapter 3 assesses and critiques Joyce Epstein's theory and framework on family-school-community partnerships from the perspective of homelessness and high mobility in an urban district. It suggests that school employees, community providers, and HHM parents had wide-ranging experiences with partnerships and highlights how the residential context of HHM families sometimes influenced partnership building. Chapter 4 foregrounds the suburban dispersal of poverty and homelessness and explores how school and community leaders respond to socioeconomic community change. It suggests that leaders create racialized narratives about their suburb, which they use to justify their actions or the actions of others around poverty and homelessness—with implications for the educational opportunities for students and families. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses how Chapters 2, 3, and 4 form a collection of work that contributes to and advances research, theory, policy, and practice.

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DEDICATION

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

By ninth grade, Sam had already attended seven different urban schools. A shy teenager, Sam has trouble navigating his large high school and connecting with his new peers and teachers. He commonly suffers from asthma attacks and misses school often—leaving him to fall far behind in his work. After not being able to reach his guardian for weeks, one of his teachers receives a handwritten note from his grandmother. The teacher notices it was written on stationary from a large, family shelter.

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*Jacey and Jamal are siblings who attend a “high performing” suburban elementary school. While many of their peers have large houses with two car garages, Jacey and Jamal spent much of their primary school years bouncing between the town’s three low-income housing projects. When their mother’s car breaks down, Jacey and Jamals’ school attendance plummets. In a town void of public transportation, their mother is eventually laid off; the company cites “tardiness” as a reason for dismissal. Out of economic necessity, the family moves in with friends on the opposite side of town. Many of the district’s school leaders have little experience helping students like Jacey and Jamal.*

Student homelessness, which affects nearly every school district in the United States (Miller, 2012a), is on the rise (US Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2011; The National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2011). Yet schools and communities often have trouble effectively support these students and their families (Miller, 2012b). As the vignettes illustrate, students and their families often experience homelessness in vastly different ways. Unfortunately, this diversity can go unrecognized by popular media, academic scholars, and practitioners (Miller, 2012b; Pavlakis & Miller, 2013; Shields & Warke, 2010).

In this three-paper dissertation, I highlight the heterogeneity of student and family homelessness. In particular, I emphasize the ways in which residential space (such as shelter, doubling up with friends, or living in independent accommodations) and geographic place (such as urban or suburban areas) shape educational opportunities and experiences. Engaging in this

task requires recognition of the various education and social policies that help to shape where and how families live and where and how they experience the schooling process. By foregrounding diversity, I shed light on the needs and assets of homeless and highly mobile students and families (HHM) amid today's multifaceted and complex policy environment. By doing so, I aim to inform (or perhaps inspire) policy and programmatic responses which improve the educational opportunities and experiences of HHM students and families.

It is important to note that the vast majority of HHM students are also experiencing poverty (Buckner, 2008). In fact, in addition to students who may currently lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate, nighttime residence”—the federally mandated definition of student homelessness (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 2001)—many other families may be one rent payment, one illness, or one more missed work day away from eviction. For the purposes of this three-paper dissertation, I define homeless and highly mobile (HHM) broadly—recognizing how family homelessness is often episodic or temporary and commonly a manifestation of poverty.

For reference, Table 1 outlines the key acronyms used throughout this dissertation. In the rest of this introduction, I provide a brief overview of HHM families in the context of schooling. I also present a rationale for the three-paper format and outline the organization for the overall dissertation. Lastly, I discuss how my personal and professional background shapes my role as researcher.

Table 1

*Key Acronyms*

| <b>Policies and Programs</b>                    |                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| McKinney-Vento                                  | The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act                           |
| HEARTH Act                                      | Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act    |
| HPRP                                            | Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Emergency Assistance Program |
| NCLB                                            | No Child Left Behind                                                 |
| EHCY                                            | The Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program                 |
| <b>Organizations, Departments, and Agencies</b> |                                                                      |
| HUD                                             | U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development                     |
| NCHE                                            | National Center for Homeless Education                               |
| NAEH                                            | National Alliance to End Homelessness                                |
| ICPH                                            | Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness                      |
| LEAs                                            | Local Educational Agencies                                           |
| USICH                                           | United States Interagency Council on Homelessness                    |
| <b>Other Key Acronyms</b>                       |                                                                      |
| HHM                                             | Homeless and highly mobile                                           |
| FSCPs                                           | Family, school, and community partnerships                           |
| PTOs                                            | Parent-teacher organizations                                         |
| ACS                                             | American Community Survey                                            |
| SFP                                             | Midtown's Students and Families Program (pseudonym)                  |
| ASD                                             | Acreville School District (pseudonym)                                |

## **Overview of HHM Families**

There were over 1.2 million students who were identified as homelessness in the 2012-13 school year (NCHE, 2014). This number is likely to be an underestimate as many students and families do not report their housing status to schools due to stigma, fears of deportation and/or involvement of child services, or lack of understanding as to the benefits of identification. Simultaneously, identification by school personnel can also be challenging (James & Lopez, 2003; Pavlakis & Miller, 2013). While children and families of all race and ethnicities experience homelessness and high mobility, it is disproportionately a lived reality for poor students of color—particularly African Americans (J. Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Miller, 2011a). Drawing from a policy perspective (Miller, 2011a), in this section, I introduce the residential spaces, geographic places, and schooling implications that are relevant to the daily lives of HHM children and their families.

### **Space, Place, Schooling & Policy**

Highlighting commonalities among HHM families can overshadow the great degree of diversity in experiences and outcomes. Here, I discuss the heterogeneity in residential space, geographic place, and educational experiences and how each interacts with policy.

#### **Residential space.**

Out of economic necessity, most students experiencing homelessness (75%) spend their evenings in the homes of family friends or extended family, commonly referred to as “doubling up” (NCHE, 2014). Yet other students reside in shelters (16%), hotels/motels (6%), or are unsheltered (3%) (NCHE, 2014). Individual communities, however, vary in their availability of family and youth shelters or hotels/motels, so these percentages can differ by location.

Residential space is also shaped by federal rehousing policies. In recent years, there has been a shift in how family homelessness is addressed. Historically, the linear approach (commonly referred to as the Continuum of Care model) dominated, where families transition from the streets to a shelter system that aimed to prepare them for independent housing through a series of steps and services. Yet, the housing first approach (otherwise known as Rapid Rehousing or Housing First), which moves families directly to independent housing accommodations (which are scatter site or program based), has become increasingly more common (DeJong, 2012; Pavlakis & Miller, 2013). Through the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Homeless Emergency Assistance Program (HPRP) which was part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the longer lasting Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, the federal government has promoted a housing first model and incentivized decreased shelter stays (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness [ICPH], 2011; National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2009). Thus, these policies play a role in shaping the residential spaces in which HHM families reside.

### **Geographic place.**

Accelerated by the recent recession, families also experience homelessness and high mobility in various geographic places. Homelessness has been historically conceptualized as an urban problem (Miller & Bourgeois, 2013; Pavlakis & Miller, 2013). Yet, while urban areas still experience higher concentrations of poverty, recent scholarship suggests that poverty is growing faster in many suburban areas (Kneebone & Berube, 2012; A. Murphy, 2010). Furthermore, there has also been an increase in the proportion of singles and families who have accessed programs for the homeless in suburban and rural communities (HUD, 2011).

Federal rehousing policies such as HPRP and the HEARTH Act have also influenced the geographic spread of HHM families. As Miller and Bourgeois (2013, p. 243) posit:

...the policies' [HPRP and HEARTH] prioritization of rental assistance and housing relocation/stabilization services across *scattered* sites furthers the community-level decentralization of the HHM population. That is, rather than multiple families being clustered in common shelters and transitional housing settings, HPRP and HEARTH families will be more geographically dispersed.

Thus, these policies are not only helping to mold how HHM families live (residential space) but also where they live (geographic place)—and therefore, where they may be attending school.

#### **Schooling and policy.**

HHM students are at risk of a number of adverse educational outcomes including poor exam scores and behavior records, low grades, and high rates of grade retention and dropout (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Buckner, 2008; Masten et al., 1997; Masten, Herbers, Desjardins, Cutuli, McCormick, Spaienza, Long & Zelazo, 2012; Miller, 2011a; J. Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Obradovic et al., 2009; Rafferty et al., 2004; Zima, Wells & Freeman, 1994; Zima & Forness, 1997). They also experience high rates of residential and school mobility (Miller, 2011a), which can pose challenges for school leaders in building relationships with families, constructing healthy school climates, and engaging in whole-school reform and improvement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, Easton, 2009; Kerbow, 1996). Despite these risks, some HHM children and youth exhibit resilience (Cutuli et al., 2013; Masten, 2012; Obradovic et al., 2009). Yet, given the recent rise of and geographic spread of poverty and homelessness, HHM families can be a particularly salient policy concern for wide-ranging schools and districts.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento) plays a crucial role in aiming to improve educational outcomes. As reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), McKinney-Vento defines homelessness as students who lack *a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence* (McKinney-Vento, 2001). This includes students who are doubled up because of economic necessity or housing loss, awaiting a placement for foster care or left in a hospital, residing in a shelter, motel/hotel, or any space not meant for regular habitation, as well as migratory children who reside in these places (McKinney-Vento, 2001). In addition to defining who is homeless, McKinney-Vento provides a range of rights to students by requiring immediate enrollment, preventing segregation, and helping to ensure equal access to services. It also plays a key role in reducing school mobility by requiring Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to keep students—to the extent possible—in the school where they were last enrolled. Lastly, it also mandates that districts communicate with families and collaborate with school and community providers that are involved in the care and education of children and youth experiencing homelessness (NCHE, 2008). Thus, McKinney-Vento can play a key role in shaping the schools families attend as well as families' access to wide ranging education-related resources both within and beyond school building walls.

### **Rationale for Three-Paper Format**

My dissertation follows a three-paper format and includes five chapters. After Chapter 1 (this Introduction), I present three independent but related papers (Chapters 2-4) before I conclude the dissertation with Chapter 5. The three papers presented in Chapters 2-4 each stand as independent, sole-authored, empirical manuscripts. In other words, they include their own literature review, theoretical framework, methods, findings, implications, and references. Importantly however, they also share common themes. Addressing a crucial gap in the extant

literature, each paper foregrounds the diversity inherent in homelessness in high mobility, and each one examines the complex ways in which residential space or geographic place shape educational opportunities. As such, policies such as the HEARTH Act as well as McKinney-Vento are relevant to each paper. While each paper makes contributions to the field in its own right, concomitantly they help to create a more complete picture of how wide-ranging policies and the actions of schools and communities help mold educational opportunities for HHM students and their families.

All three papers are also situated in the same metropolitan statistical area<sup>1</sup> and the same Midwestern county. This particular county has embraced the housing first movement for families for the past few years—making it an ideal location for this three-paper dissertation. Midtown, a pseudonym for the anchoring city of the metropolitan area, is the urban context for Chapters 2 and 3. Midtown is home to a handful of family shelters and the Midtown school district also has an award-winning program to oversee implementation of McKinney-Vento. In contrast to Chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 4 draws data from Acreville, a pseudonym for a suburb of Midtown. While Midtown and Acreville share similar metropolitan and county level characteristics, Acreville is void of family shelters and lacks the McKinney-Vento infrastructure of Midtown. By situating all three studies in the same county and metropolitan area, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of HHM families' educational opportunities and how they are shaped by residential space and geographic place.

Chapters 2 and 3 draw data from a larger, multi-year study on homelessness in Midtown, which a team of scholars (including an Assistant Professor and three graduate students) began conducting during the 2011-12 school year. For the larger project, sources of data included 132

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Office of Management and Budget defines metropolitan areas as regions consisting of an urban core

interviews with school employees, community providers, and parents experiencing homelessness, artifact collection, and analysis of district data. I participated in all phases of the larger study development with my colleagues, but designed, analyzed, and authored the papers in Chapter 2 and 3 independently. For Chapter 4, I personally planned and executed all stages of the study design. The Acreville data, collected between January and October of 2014, includes 42 interviews with school and community leaders, 15.5 hours of school board meeting observation, analyses of longitudinal school district data, and the examination of over 50 school and community artifacts.

Chapter 2 is titled, “Living and learning at the intersection: Student homelessness and complex policy environments.” The purpose of this chapter is to learn about how families who are impacted by both McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies (such as the HEARTH Act) experience schooling. It uniquely contributes to the literature by considering the intersections of education policy with broader rehousing policies. In this chapter, I garner insights from Nan Lin’s network theory of social capital (Lin, 1999, 2000) and argue that in a number of ways, how rehousing policies and education policies interact molds HHM students and families’ social networks, access to resources, and ultimately, their opportunities to thrive.

Chapter 3, “Reaching all families: Family, school, and community partnerships amid homelessness and high mobility in an urban district,” also focuses on residential space and educational opportunity in Midtown. While building off the themes of Chapter 2, I also enter uncharted territory when I assess and critique the dominant paradigm on parental involvement (Joyce Epstein’s theory and framework on family-school-community partnerships (Epstein, 2011)) from the perspective of homelessness and high mobility. Despite McKinney-Vento’s mandate for communication and collaboration with families and providers, I suggest that school

employees, community providers, and HHM parents had wide-ranging experiences with partnerships and that school personnel varied greatly in their ability to engage HHM families in schooling. Finally, I highlight how the residential context of HHM families (which are molded by federal rehousing policies such as the HEARTH Act) sometimes influenced partnership building.

Chapter 4 turns to the Midtown suburb of Acreville. Here I foreground the suburban dispersal of poverty and homelessness, which is in part influenced by federal rehousing policies such as the HEARTH Act (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Miller & Bourgeois, 2013; Murphy, 2010). In “Poverty and student homelessness at the metropolitan margins: Sensemaking among school and community leaders in a growing suburb,” I garner insights from sensemaking theories, particularly the work of Karl Weick and colleagues (1995, 2005) in order to explore how leaders respond to socioeconomic community change. I suggest that leaders create racialized narratives about Acreville that they employ when justifying their actions or the actions of others around matters related to poverty and homelessness. These accounts, which are evident in local policy, play a role in shaping educational opportunities for HHM students and families.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation and examines the main findings and implications across Chapters 2-4. In particular, it considers how the set of papers (both independently and concomitantly) contribute to theory, research, policy, and practice. Before turning to Chapter 2, I provide a brief discussion of my positionality and how it informs my research.

### **Positionality**

My first full-time job was as a secondary school social studies teacher in Brooklyn. My students taught me to critically consider how diverse out of school factors, such as the needs and

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<sup>2</sup> Because the Acreville study draws from the suburban poverty literature, in Chapter 4, I chose to use the phrase “students and families experiencing poverty and homelessness” rather than “HHM.”

assets of their neighborhoods, seeped into our classroom. Faced with bright and resourceful students, but also an ever changing student roster, high rates of asthma, students living in cars, and coming to school hungry, I became increasingly interested in the broader geographic, social, and policy contexts which shaped the lives of my students and their families. As a novice teacher, I was ill prepared to deal with many of the pedagogical challenges that came with a high poverty school. I have no recollection of ever learning about the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and I had little in-depth knowledge of the surrounding neighborhood's assets. While I handed out granola bars on a daily basis, I had little knowledge of how to connect my students to food pantries and other resources.

This early professional experience served as the foundation of my professional background to date, which has focused on researching and understanding poverty as it manifests in schooling, specifically through the lens of homelessness and high mobility. While much of my work as a scholar, researcher, and practitioner has focused on traditionally "urban spaces," I am also a product of a suburban school system myself. I am aware that my background and positionality as a researcher shape the ways in which I design studies, collect data, and analyze and present findings. In conducting interviews I strive to create guided conversations (Yin, 2009), but I also limit sharing my own experiences. This is particularly important because I do not want my experiences in particular cities, suburban areas, and neighborhoods to inhibit me from recognizing the ways in which poverty and homelessness may manifest itself in unique ways in different spaces and places.

Additionally, my position as a middle-class white female is also relevant. In conducting interviews with HHM families (see Chapters 2 and 3), my gender likely engendered trust because most of the parents were single mothers. Yet many of the interview participants were

parents of color and my whiteness probably shaped discussions. With that said, a number of participants were quite open with me on matters related to race relations, even though that was not the explicit focus of the interview questions. In the third study (Chapter 4), being white and middle-class likely facilitated my interviews with school and community leaders because my identity most closely resembled the majority of the interview participants' racial and socioeconomic status. However, in Acreville, a couple of participants noted that they could tell I was "not from around here." In this sense, the fact that I was born and raised out of state created a sense of otherness between some participants and myself. Throughout the research process, however, I was cognizant of how power, race, and privilege was relevant to how poverty, homelessness and high mobility unfolded in diverse spaces and places.

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## **Chapter 2:**

### **Living and Learning at the Intersection: Student Homelessness and Complex Policy Environments**

*Abstract:*

In urban districts, homeless and highly mobile students are an important contributor to achievement disparities—and their numbers are rising. To date there has been little inquiry into how broader education and housing policies shape the schooling experiences of homeless and highly mobile families. Using semi-structured interviews with 132 key community stakeholders (parents, school social workers, other school staff, and community/service personnel) in one urban area, this study explored how families living at the policy intersection of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and federal rehousing policies, such as the HEARTH Act, experience the schooling process. These policies have important impacts on students; the McKinney-Vento Act provides them with a range of supports while recent federal policies such as the HEARTH Act are shifting where and how they are living. Taking a policy perspective and drawing insights from Lin’s network theory of social capital, the findings suggest that these policies both independently and concomitantly shape families’ life opportunities. Implications for schools, communities, and scholars are addressed.

*Keywords: homelessness, mobility, urban districts, social capital, policy*

Spurred by the recent recession and the general budget crisis, student homelessness has become an educational crisis. Today, few schools are left unscathed (Miller, 2011d, 2012a). In the 2011-12 school year, 1,168,354 students were identified as experiencing homelessness in U.S. schools, a 10% increase from the 2010-11 school year (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2013). This growth is concerning because children experiencing homelessness tend to have poor school attendance and participation (Kearney, 2008; Kennedy, 2007; Stronge, 1993) and low grades and achievement scores (Masten, Sesma, Si-Asar, Lawrence, Miliotis, & Dionne, 1997; Obradović et al., 2009; Rafferty, Shinn & Weitzman, 2004). They also experience high rates of grade retention, school dropout, and identification for special education (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Rafferty et al., 2004). While residentially stable low-income students also tend to face a range of barriers to school success (Buckner, 2008), students experiencing homelessness have elevated rates of school mobility (Rafferty, et al., 2004; Tierney, Gupton & Hallett, 2008) and social isolation (Anooshian, 2000, 2003); research suggests however, that both mobility and social isolation are risk factors for adverse educational outcomes (Anooshian, 2003; Burkham, Lee & Dwyer, 2009; Miller, 2011a; Reynolds, Chen & Dwyer, 2009). According to Noblit and Pink (2007), urban school districts are associated not only with geographic connotations but also with a range of education problems; in fact, homeless and highly mobile students may be an important contributor to achievement gaps in these areas (Masten, 2012; Obradović et al., 2009).

Alongside these common barriers, students experiencing homelessness tend to have wide ranging educational needs and assets. For instance, even though many homeless and highly mobile students score below national means on standardized tests, evidence suggests that some students exhibit academic resilience (Cutuli et al., 2013; Masten, 2011, 2012; Obradović et al.,

2009). In addition to this achievement variability, students experiencing homelessness also travel to school from diverse nighttime residences; at the time of identification during the 2011-12 school year, 75% were living with friends or family out of need (doubled-up), 15% were in shelter, 6% were in motels/hotels, and 4% were not sheltered (NCHE, 2013). In order to effectively meet needs, schools and communities are required to develop differentiated responses to these residential conditions (Miller, 2009, 2011c, 2012b).

Homeless and highly mobile families experience schooling in ways that are shaped by broad policies. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento) defines which students are homeless, lays out the rights of these students, and establishes a range of supports. Simultaneously, federal housing policies aimed specifically at individuals and families experiencing homelessness, referred to here as “rehousing policies,” can mold where families live as well as their access to community and school resources. Historically, the federal government has promoted the use of shelters that provide a range of on-site services such as treatment, tutoring, and parenting classes. Critics have claimed, however, that these “service-enriched shelters” are ineffective and inefficient (Gulcur, Stefancic, Shinn, Tsemberis, & Fischer, 2003; Metraux & Culhane, 1999; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007). Recent government policies such as the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) as well as the Homeless Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, focus instead on placing families directly into permanent, independent living accommodations. This policy shift and the interaction between housing policies and McKinney-Vento have implications for the schooling experiences of homeless and highly mobile families.

The purpose of this study is to learn about how families who live at the intersection of McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies experience the schooling process. At one point

or another, the vast majority of families with school-aged children who are or recently were experiencing homelessness have lived at this intersection. These families are guaranteed rights under McKinney-Vento but also experience homelessness in settings that are influenced by federal rehousing policies. While researchers have addressed McKinney-Vento (James & Lopez, 2003; Jozefowicz-Simbeno & Israel, 2006; Larson & Meehan, 2011; Miller, 2011b) and rehousing policies independently (Bassuk & Geller, 2006; Culhane, Metraux, Schretzman & Valente, 2007; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004), this study extends the conceptual work of Pavlakis and Miller (2013) and fills an important gap by empirically exploring their intersections. Fundamentally, these policies may impact families' access to and use of education-related resources. By better understanding the lives of homeless and highly mobile families, schools and community agencies can develop effective cross-sector systems of practice (Miller, 2009, 2011c).

### **Review of Literature**

Two policy arenas are particularly relevant to the schooling experiences of homeless and highly mobile families: the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and federal rehousing policies such as the HEARTH Act. While the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides a number of supports and rights to students experiencing homelessness, federal rehousing policies help to shape where and how homeless and highly mobile families are living.

#### **The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (P.L. 100-77) of 1987 became the first piece of federal legislation to directly address the wellbeing of the homeless. Eventually renamed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento), it remains to this day the only comprehensive federal legislative reaction to homelessness (National Coalition for

the Homeless [NCH], 2006; Grasser, 2005). Importantly, the Act established the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY) which Congress reauthorized under Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110). In this form, McKinney-Vento declares that children and youth without a *fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence* are homeless. This includes children who are abandoned in the hospital, awaiting placement in foster care, sleeping in shelters, or living in motels/hotels. It also covers children residing in places not meant for human habitation, as well as those who are doubled up (living with friends or family out of economic necessity). Migratory children living in these places also qualify.

In addition to defining student homelessness, McKinney-Vento addresses school mobility, which is commonly cited as a formidable barrier to educational success (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001; Engec, 2006; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004). For instance, Kerbow, Azcoita, and Buell (2003) found that Chicago elementary school students who changed schools three or more times between first and sixth grade were almost a full academic year behind their stable peers. Yet, by the nature of their housing status, students experiencing homelessness are often vulnerable to school changes (Rafferty et al., 2004; Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008). In response, the Act tries to reduce school mobility by requiring school districts to retain students, to the extent possible, in their “school of origin” (or school where they last attended or attended when permanently housed). Parents or guardians can request transportation to and from their school of origin or decide to transfer their child to the school that is closest to their current temporary residence. Students have a right to remain at their school of origin the entire time they are homeless; if they become permanently housed during the school year, they can stay at their school of origin for the remainder of the academic year (NCHE, 2008) although districts are under no statutory obligation to continue to pay for

transportation (Rutkin, 2003). In this sense, families who enter permanent housing in the middle of the academic year also temporarily benefit from McKinney-Vento.

The Act also provides students experiencing homelessness with additional educational rights, such as equal access to school services, immediate enrollment, and protection against segregation by housing status, as well as a range of educational supports through the EHCY. It is attributed with increasing identification, spreading awareness of the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness, and improving access to a range of supports (Wong et al., 2009).

While McKinney-Vento is laudable, many schools struggle to effectively serve homeless students (Groton, Teasley & Canfield, 2013; Miller, 2011b). Most notably, the identification of students can be challenging (James & Lopez, 2003; Larson & Meehan, 2011), not all school staff and families are well aware of McKinney-Vento (Miller 2009; 2012a), and importantly, the Act is underfunded, hindering districts' attempts to carry out its tenets (Miller 2012a; Tanabe & Mobley, 2011; Wong et al., 2009). The Act requires states to provide school districts with competitive subgrants based on need and quality of the district's application (Wong et al., 2009), but most districts do not receive subgrants. For example, during the 2011-12 school year, nearly 80% of school districts in the U.S. were charged with identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness without any policy-attached financial support (NCHE, 2013).

Importantly, serving the needs of students experiencing homelessness extends beyond the walls of the school; in essence, it requires interagency and cross sector collaboration among diverse institutions such as schools, social service agencies, and faith-based organizations (Miller, 2009, 2012b; Pavlakis & Miller, 2013; Tucker, 2000). Essentially, McKinney-Vento mandates coordinated action. Each state has a State Coordinator for Homeless Education and, under the Act, each district must also have a designated local homeless education liaison.

District liaisons work to ensure that students experiencing homelessness are identified and have equal access to educational services and opportunities. They are also tasked with educating families about their rights and making sure school and community staff understand the district liaison's role. To accomplish these responsibilities, district liaisons collaborate with the State Coordinator for Homeless Education as well as with social workers, case managers, and other relevant community stakeholders (NCHE, 2008). While important, authentic and effective coordinated action can be particularly challenging within the broader policy environment—which is marked by significant changes in how homeless and highly mobile families' residential needs are addressed.

### **Federal Rehousing Policies**

There are two dominant paradigms in rehousing policy and practice. These paradigms impact families' daily routines and shape the places from which families and their children experience the schooling process. In most cases, these places, by virtue of their physical location, even determine families' schooling assignments. One paradigm, encouraged by the Continuum of Care Policy in 1995, is the linear model, which provides services and treatment as a prerequisite for permanent housing. The other is the housing first philosophy, which argues that permanent housing should be provided immediately. The federal government has recently supported the housing first philosophy through policies such as the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009.

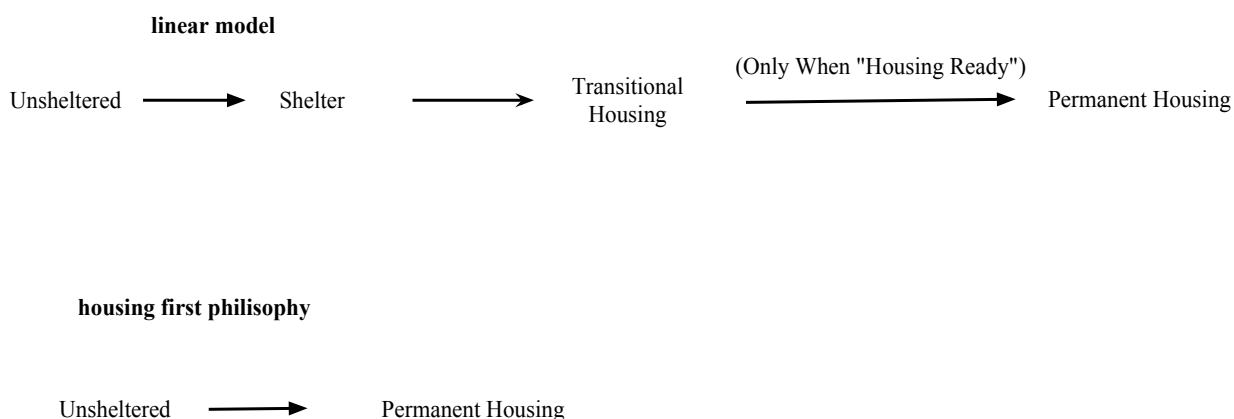
#### **Linear model.**

Initially, most homeless services were provided by local charities (Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne, 2010). The federal government spurred community collaboration (Culhane et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2002) and promoted a linear

model of homeless assistance with the Continuum of Care Policy in 1995 (Kertesz, Crouch, Milby, Cusimano & Schumacher, 2009; see also, Ridgway & Zippel, 1990). While this approach is sometimes referred to as the “Continuum of Care,” inherently, this term is associated with specific regulatory HUD funding and as such, the “linear model” is a more appropriate term (Kertesz, et al., 2009). In this approach, the final goal is to become “housing ready” and move into independent accommodations. Figure 1 illustrates a simplified example of the linear model—individuals or families may move from unsheltered situations (such as living on the streets or in a car) to a shelter, from shelter to transitional housing, and finally, from traditional housing to permanent housing. Along this path, the linear model provides participants with a range of on-site services, such as case management, job training, and social, emotional, and/or health interventions (Culhane, 2011; Kertesz et al., 2009).

#### **A different paradigm.**

Alternatively, a contrasting paradigm or philosophy, known as housing first, also developed (Padgett, Gulcer, Tsemberis, 2006; De Jong, 2012). From this perspective, people should be housed before services or supports for other issues are provided. Permanent housing, seen as a “fundamental need and human right” is the first and most important priority (Padgett et al., 2006, p. 75). As the example in Figure 1 illustrates, with the housing first philosophy, people experiencing homelessness might transition directly from unsheltered situations to permanent housing, potentially skipping over shelter and transitional housing altogether. Over the last two decades, federal policy for chronic homelessness, which has been traditionally defined as consistently homeless, single disabled adults (HUD, 2009), has shifted away from service-enriched shelters in favor of the housing first philosophy.



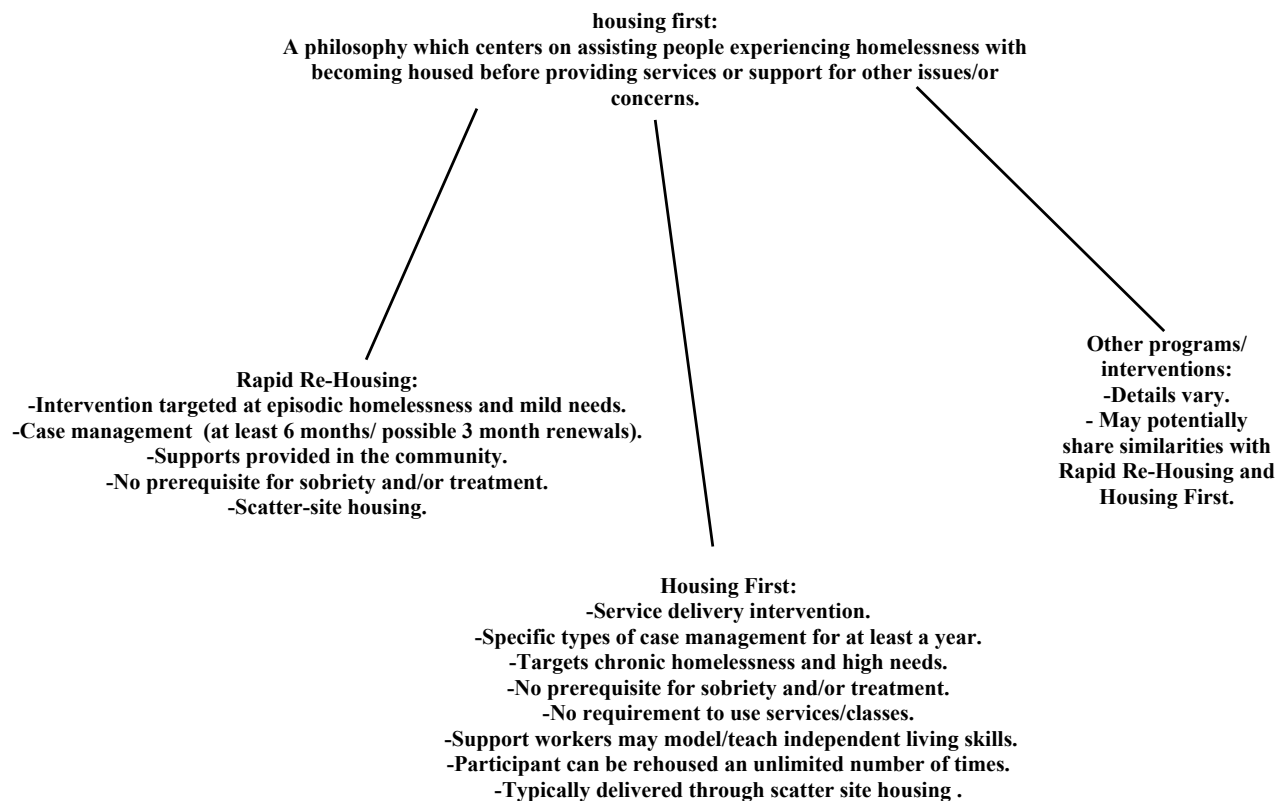
*Figure 1.* Simplified example of the linear model compared to the housing first philosophy.

Examining this alternative paradigm can be complicated by inconsistent terminology on rehousing programs (see Fakhoury, Murray, Shepherd, & Priebe, 2002). Of particular relevance here, commonly, “housing first,” “Housing First” (capitalized), and “Rapid Re-housing” are used as interchangeable terms by communities, service providers, and researchers. However, these terms are also often applied to wide-ranging programs and interventions. Two different communities for instance, may both have “Housing First” programs but these programs might be very different in practice. While the distinctions between these terms are not well parsed out in the academic literature, De Jong (2012) provides a helpful description. According to De Jong (2012), and as illustrated in Figure 2, “Rapid Re-housing” and “Housing First” both ascribe to the philosophy of housing first, but additional programs and interventions may reflect this alternative paradigm as well.

Rapid Re-housing is an intervention targeted at episodic (short term) homelessness for people with mild needs. For at least six months, recipients receive a rental subsidy and case

management (with possible three month renewals), while other supports are provided in the community. Most participants in Rapid Re-housing interventions are residing in scatter-site apartments, where the other units in the building are normal rentals (De Jong, 2012).

Housing First, meanwhile, is a service delivery intervention that tends to last for at least a year (De Jong, 2012). It focuses on chronic homelessness and often addresses people with co-occurring issues, such as severe mental illness as well as medical and/or addiction needs (Kertesz, 2009). Clients contribute a percentage of their monthly income towards the rent and meet regularly with support workers (Gulcur et al., 2003). Because of the participants' higher level needs, support workers may engage more in modeling or teaching living skills (such as shopping and laundry) than they might in Rapid Re-housing. Typically, Housing First is also delivered through scatter site housing units (Padgett et al., 2006; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007). For the purposes of this study, "housing first programs" is used as an umbrella term to refer to all programs or interventions that adhere to the housing first philosophy (including but not limited to Housing First and Rapid Re-housing interventions).



*Figure 2.* Terminology for housing first. Adapted from Back to basics-what exactly is Housing First and Rapid Re-housing? [Web log post], by I. De Jong, May 15, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.orgcode.com/2012/05/15/back-to-basics-what-exactly-is-housing-first-rapid-re-housing/>

Most of the academic research on housing first programs examines chronic homelessness and Housing First. As such, this research addresses outcomes such as housing stability and drug use and/or mental health treatment for single adults. In fact, most of the research examines the interventions of one organization, Pathways to Housing, which was founded by Dr. Sam Tsemberis (Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012). This body of research generally suggests positive outcomes for this population, such as housing stability at 48 months (Padgett et al., 2006) and cost savings compared to linear models (Culhane, 2008; Tsemberis, 2010; Gulcur et al., 2003). While this small body of academic research suggests that Housing First is effective

for rehousing chronically homeless individuals, there is little to no empirical evidence about how housing first programs impact families (Waagemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012).

Despite the dearth of relevant research evidence, recently, the federal government began calling for housing first programs for families. In February 2009, President Obama allocated \$1.5 billion for the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP), a homeless prevention fund. A few months later, a bill was signed to reauthorize HUD's McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance programs. The bill's provisions matched two earlier bills that were collectively known as the HEARTH Act (NAEH, 2009). The HEARTH Act both expanded the focus on preventing homelessness, incentivized communities to reduce the length of stay in shelter, and emphasized the housing first philosophy for families (Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2011). The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), which was reauthorized by the HEARTH Act, released *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* in 2010, which aimed to end family homelessness in a decade. It also promoted the housing first philosophy for families (USICH, 2010).

Not only are families who enter housing first programs impacted by these policies, but many other families experiencing homelessness are too. In response to the HEARTH Act, shelters may reduce the maximum number of days families can stay. Coupled with potential capacity issues as well as the monthly rental contribution required in many housing first programs, families may be encouraged to double up. While national data likely reflects more than just the rehousing policy changes (including the impacts of the recent recession and stimulus money for identification), overall, the number of students experiencing homelessness has risen 24% between the 2009-10 and 2011-12 school year. Yet, the proportion of students

who were living in shelter dropped from 19% to 15% during this same time period, and the proportion in doubled up arrangements increased from 71% to 75% (NCHE, 2013).

With federal rehousing policies now encouraging the use of housing first programs for families, it becomes even more important to address this research niche. Not only is little known about the effects of these interventions on families, but scholarly, empirical evidence of their impacts on other outcomes, such as education, are altogether absent (Pavlakakis & Miller, 2013; Miller, 2012b). Miller's (2009, 2011c, 2012b) work suggests that students' diverse conditions of homelessness demand differentiated school and community engagement, although much is still unknown about how these diverse conditions shape school-related experiences. In response, this study asks, "How do families who live at the intersection of McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies experience the schooling process?" To address this question, a series of sub-questions also guide this study:

- How are educational resources accessed and mobilized by families living in traditional shelter settings, doubling up with family and friends, and participating in housing first programs?
- In what ways do rehousing policies impact how families and children experience schooling?
- How do rehousing policies shape families' support networks?
- How might rehousing policies influence children's social wellbeing, educational opportunities, and/or educational attainment?

Accordingly, this study contributes to the research by examining how families who are impacted by both McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies experience the schooling process.

### Perspectives & Theoretical Frameworks

In an effort to learn about families who live at the intersection of McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies, a policy perspective guides this study (Miller, 2011a). In other words, this study considers how education policy and federal rehousing policies each independently shape conditions for homeless and highly mobile families *and also* addresses how these policies intersect with one another. In addition to the policy perspective, this study is informed by social capital theory.

Social capital has been conceptualized and examined in wide-ranging ways—perhaps most notably by Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1995)—and broadly refers to relationships and their associated outcomes. When used to explore student and family experiences and outcomes (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goddard, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Miller, 2011c, 2011d; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001), social capital theory generally posits that certain types of relationships and networks are particularly helpful in enabling positive educational success.

This study draws particular guidance from Nan Lin's (1999, 2000) network theory of social capital. Lin defines social capital as “resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (Lin, 1999, p. 35). Lin's work (1999, 2000) is especially useful in this examination of student homelessness and policy because it focuses on factors that affect both *access to* and *mobilization of* education and housing-related relationships and resources. Concomitantly, the network theory of social capital informs analyses of students' and families' network compositions and their attachments to institutions such as schools and community-based organizations. Lin suggests that such compositions and attachments have significant implications for the nature and extent of life opportunities that unfold. He notes that people of color, women, and low-income individuals tend to have networks that are composed of

others similar to themselves with few connections to individuals of a higher socio-economic status. They also are less likely to be associated with groups or organizations that have access to potentially useful resources (Lin, 2000; Miller, 2011d). As such, their life opportunities are often diminished. This study complements and extends the work of Miller (2011d, 2012b), which also drew organizational insights from Nan Lin’s network theory of social capital, by focusing specifically on the role of federal education and rehousing policies. Alongside—and in relationship with—these identity-associated network challenges, this study posits that housing and education policy intersections shape homeless and highly mobile students’ and families’ networks and, in turn, their chances to thrive. Specifically, this study draws from Lin (1999, 2000) to consider how the implementation of McKinney-Vento and rehousing policies in one urban community affected homeless and highly mobile families’ access to and use of local education-resources and, ultimately the ways and extent to which this policy intersection cultivated and/or militated against authentic educational opportunity.

### **Methods**

This investigation of homeless education policy and practice took place in “Midtown<sup>3</sup>”—a pseudonym for a mid-sized Midwestern city. There are a number of reasons why Midtown was an appropriate setting for these research questions. Similar to many other urban locations around the country, Midtown has witnessed a rise in student homelessness; between the 2008-2009 school year and the 2011-2012 school year, the number of students identified more than doubled. Unlike many other medium-sized districts however, Midtown aims to respond to student homelessness in a purposeful way. Four full time staff members work under the district’s Students and Families Program (SFP) to oversee the implementation and interpretation of the McKinney-Vento Act and to make sure that homeless and highly mobile students and

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<sup>3</sup> For confidentiality reasons, all proper names and other identifiers have been changed.

families have full access to a range of educational opportunities. In the last few years, Midtown has also embraced the housing first philosophy towards families. Founded in 2008, Helpful Homes, for instance, is a rental assistance and case management program for families where at least one adult is disabled. Since 2009 there has also been a Rapid Re-housing intervention in Midtown, where for a year, families receive the first month's rent, the security deposit, and an 11-month rental subsidy coupled with supportive case management services. Given that the federal government currently supports the housing first philosophy, but little is known about its educational consequences, Midtown was an ideal setting for this empirical work.

Part of a larger case study of Midtown, this study draws from 132 qualitative semi-structured interviews which were conducted by a research team composed of one Assistant Professor and three graduate students. Interview participants included: parents experiencing homelessness (n=38), school personnel (n=76), and community/service personnel (n=18). In terms of the parent interviews, 89.5% were female parents (n=34) and 10.5% were male (n=4). Data was gathered from parents who, at the time of the interview, were residing in a range of residential settings (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Parent/Guardians' Program Type/Residential Setting*

| <b>Program Type/Residential Setting of participant</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Traditional family shelter                             | 19           |
| Rotating church shelter for families                   | 5            |
| Rapid Re-housing*                                      | 12           |
| Helpful Homes*                                         | 2            |
| <b>Total</b>                                           | <b>38</b>    |

\* *housing first programs.*

In addition to reporting on their current living situation, parents were also asked about their former housing settings, including doubling up with family and friends. To thank them, parents were given a 10-ride adult bus pass at the conclusion of the interview. The research team contacted all of Midtown's school social workers (interviewing 74% of them) and then used snowball sampling (Bryman, 2004) to identify additional relevant school personnel. Table 2 shows the school participants disaggregated by their position.

Table 2

*School Participants*

| <b>Position of Participant</b>        | <b>Total</b> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| Social Worker                         | 41           |
| Principal                             | 5            |
| School Psychologist                   | 2            |
| School Nurse                          | 6            |
| Administrative Assistant              | 7            |
| Bilingual Resource Specialist         | 4            |
| Bilingual/ELL Teacher                 | 1            |
| Parent-Teacher Organization President | 1            |
| Classroom Teacher                     | 6            |
| Interventionist                       | 1            |
| Guidance Counselor                    | 2            |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>76</b>    |

To identify relevant community stakeholders, the research team contacted all member agencies of a countywide homeless consortium that specifically served Midtown families and children and then used snowball sampling to garner participant triangulation. Semi-structured interview protocols were developed that broadly addressed matters relating to relationship/resource creation, access, and mobilization amid conditions of student and family homelessness in Midtown. Table 3 shows sample questions from these protocols that were used with parents, school personnel, and community providers.

Table 3

*Examples from the Semi-Structured Interview Protocols*

| <b>Parents</b>                                                                                                                                                   | <b>School Personnel</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>Community Providers</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Describe a typical day for you and your family. Since you've been here, who and/or what has been most useful in helping your family with school-related matters? | What factors are most noteworthy in facilitating your work with homeless students? What inhibits your work?<br><br>What organizations (including schools and other community-based organizations) does your school work most closely with?<br><br>How do these connections help students/families with school-related matters? | What resources does your organization provide to help support students and parents with school-related matters during periods of homelessness?<br><br>What organizations (including schools and other community-based organizations) does your organization work most closely with?<br><br>How do these connections help students/families with school-related matters? |

After transcribing the digitally recorded interviews and uploading them to NVivo 10, the author used an inductive, open coding process to highlight emergent themes that were embedded in the participants' responses and an axial coding process to identify relationships between the themes. Then the author analyzed the data in relation to the policy perspective and Nan Lin's network theory of social capital. Table 4 provides examples of how the data led to findings.

Table 4

*Examples of How Interview Data Led to Findings*

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Direct quote from participant</b> | <p>"Because she [school social worker] just sort of took over, you know, like I did not have to explain anymore, or, it just seemed like I was always explaining what the situation was, and then once we got into the SFP program that... I stopped having to explain to everyone... She was a great liaison and she, ultimately through that program, was the one that found the Rapid Re-housing because I would've never, I don't think she even knew about it before she got some information for me so. But you know I mean, especially when we were driving from Valley City every day, you know, obviously they could not provide transportation from way up there, but I got gas cards for about eight months." <span style="float: right;">-Rapid Re-housing Parent</span></p> |                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Code(s)</b>                       | par.views                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | inter.collab                                                                                                                |
| <b>Code Meaning</b>                  | Parents experiencing homelessness perspectives of their children's schools.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Extent to which individual schools, districts, shelter providers, or community agencies work together to meet family needs. |

|                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Connections to Lin's Network Theory</b> | <i>Access to and mobilization of resources; heterogeneous, bridging networks; role of institutional attachment.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Findings</b>                            | Social workers and SFP program vital to how families access community resources.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Expertise and/or willingness of school staff to collaborate with other schools/districts/agencies enables families to maintain educational stability. |
| <b>Direct quote from participant</b>       | <p>"I think once things have settled in their own lives, which things don't fully for certain people, but once stable housing is there, there is a bigger capacity to do these things. It's very time consuming to get your kids registered, to find out what there is out there and figure out how to pay for it, if there's a scholarship available, and it's a big thing, big thing when you're a single parent like most of our families are too."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Rapid Re-housing case manager</p> |                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Code(s)</b>                             | hf.resources                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Code Meaning</b>                        | How housing first programs impact families' <i>access to and mobilization of</i> resources.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Connections to Lin's Network Theory</b> | <i>Access to and mobilization of resources; purposive actions.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Findings</b>                            | Sometimes, residing in stable, independent living arrangements can strengthen parents' capacity to access and mobilize educational resources for their children.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                       |

## Findings

Even though McKinney-Vento is considered school-related, and the linear approach and HEARTH are often discussed in housing contexts, many homeless and highly mobile families live at the intersection of these policies. How these families experience the schooling process, although variable, is fundamentally molded by these policies. Foundationally, the residential context—which is shaped by rehousing policies—uniquely influences families’ schooling experiences and their access to McKinney-Vento supports. This study first addresses these general trends and the education-related tradeoffs involved in where and how families live. It then turns to how this policy environment is understood and acted upon by families and schools. The parent interviews suggested that a number of families are confused about their McKinney-Vento rights—and this confusion is at times bolstered by the ways in which McKinney-Vento interacts with recent federal rehousing policies. Likewise, school personnel have wide-ranging understandings of policy—with important implications for students’ educational opportunities. These policy understandings influence the relationships between schools and families. They also both shape and are shaped by how schools and communities interact. In terms of family-school relations, and reflecting the variance in school personnel’s policy knowledge, parents held different opinions about whether or not the school is responsive to their diverse residential contexts. Coupled with this, even though McKinney-Vento mandates collaboration and federal rehousing policies make cross-sector action all the more important, the data suggested—with one notable, geography-based exception—that many school-based social workers still continue to work in isolation. Accordingly, and despite McKinney-Vento, families can experience different relationships with their school and vastly different access to resources that are personalized to

their needs depending on their residential context, school catchment zone, and individual school social worker.

### **Residential Context, General Trends & Tradeoffs**

Rehousing policies shape where and how students and their families live. The interviews with parents, school personnel, and community stakeholders suggested that residential context plays a crucial role in how families gain access to education-related resources—including those covered by McKinney-Vento. Federal rehousing policies, such as the HEARTH Act, aim to decrease shelter stays and encourage families with children to move directly into independent living situations through housing first programs. Yet, the interviews revealed that shelter provides some education-related benefits to families. Generally, there are tradeoffs involved in residing in shelter, independent living situations, and doubled up arrangements (see Table 5).

#### **Family shelter & education-related resources.**



As shown in Table 5, for families in shelter, the lack of privacy, restrictive rules, and confined spaces hindered family routines and hurt children's ability to study and sleep. Many parents were also anxious to find housing before their 90 days (the maximum length of stay in Midtown's largest family shelter) expired. Yet, simultaneously, interviews revealed the many ways in which these same shelters, and the requirements for inter-organizational collaboration in McKinney-Vento, positively shaped families' school related experiences. The central role of the shelter caseworker emerged as a prominent theme in 17 out of 24 interviews with parents in shelter. Parents valued the fact that their shelter caseworker aided in school enrollment, connected them to after school programs, and worked with the school social worker to coordinate McKinney-Vento transportation and supports. As one shelter caseworker explained:

I actually think that for families in our program they benefit because they have the case manager who can help deal with that school communication. My gut is that a lot of our families, the parents didn't have the best education experience themselves and so they are scared to enter schools and scared to deal with teachers and all that and so I think having a case manager is really helpful because they can go along to those school meetings and help address that discomfort and maybe... hopefully at the end of the program the parent is comfortable doing it on their own.

Ten out of 24 parents living in shelter reflected on the benefits of on-site educational services, such as early learning sessions and parenting classes. For instance, one single father who was living in a rotating church shelter for families (where families sleep in different places of worship), commented that the program connected him to useful parenting resources. When he found housing he felt that he was not going to “leave empty handed” but would be provided with a range of helpful resources.

Table 5

*Disadvantages and Advantages of Doubling Up, Shelter, and Independent Living*

|                                                                                    | Doubled Up                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Shelter                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Independent Living                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19 out of 38 parents reported holistically negative experiences.</li> <li>• Social isolation.</li> <li>• Lack of privacy.</li> <li>• Parenting issues.</li> <li>• Some diminished access to educational programs.</li> <li>• Lack of shelter or program case manager.</li> </ul> <p>"I felt like I was walking on egg shells."</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time limited.</li> <li>• Lack of privacy.</li> <li>• Rules.</li> <li>• Confined spaces.</li> <li>• Role of other shelter parents.</li> </ul> <p>"nothing is private at all..."</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation obstacles.</li> <li>• Poor apartment conditions.</li> <li>• Social isolation.</li> </ul> <p>"I am 22...I don't go out at all and like my friends talk about me, call me 'grandma.'"</p>                                                                                                                         |
|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter case manager (17 out of 24 parents).</li> <li>• Onsite educational services (10 out of 24 parents).</li> <li>• Role of other shelter parents.</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program case managers (6 out of 14 parents in housing first programs).</li> </ul> <p>Range of additional benefits (10 out of 14 parents):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reunited family.</li> <li>• Guests.</li> <li>• Homework routines.</li> <li>• Lack of embarrassment.</li> <li>• Better sleep.</li> </ul> |

Of additional interest here is the role that other shelter parents played in how families connected to resources. On the one hand, in half of the interviews with parents living in shelter, participants felt that other parents created additional stress for their family and distracted them from improving their situation. One mother staying in a traditional family shelter referred to the place as “drama central” because of the friction between shelter residents and between the residents and the shelter staff. Some parents remarked that since they were “good listeners” or “social” other parents would overwhelm them with their issues and problems, which made it more difficult for them to concentrate on the daily and long term needs of their children.

According to these parents, the emotional needs of the other shelter residents distracted them from spending quality time with their children or searching for permanent housing or a new job. Others discussed how being homeless was not good a time to make friends. As one father put it “...I am not like an antisocial person, I talk to everybody, I love everybody. But you know, I, we got to think of our family first you know. Then once we get ourselves settled then you know, we will be ok.” For these parents, other residents in the shelter hindered their wellbeing.

On the other hand, because residents in shelter are all facing housing insecurity and are living in close quarters, some residents were able to build helpful and sometimes meaningful relationships with other residents. While these connections did not necessarily diversify the parents’ networks, they sometimes led to emotional support and other assistance. For instance, babysitting contracts, where one parent watches another parent’s child, made it easier for shelter residents to visit schools or search for housing—a theme raised in eight of 24 interviews. The following statement from a mother in a traditional shelter encapsulates the positive aspects of these relationships:

I believe that some of the younger women that live here, out here with children, I connect with because I was a young mom myself. So by me displaying a positive attitude doing as much as I can, and being motivated, a go-getter, and raising my daughter, and being there for my daughter, I believe some of these younger women they look to me as like a role model kind of or just somebody that they can confide in. So I talk to them, and I babysit for them, and stuff like that.

In both negative and positive ways, service-enriched shelters and congregate living influenced the daily lives of families and their experiences with the schooling process. With federal

rehousing policies, the advantages and disadvantages of shelter are being replaced by the advantages and disadvantages of independent living.

### **Independent living & education-related resources.**

For families participating in housing first programs, trends were strikingly different (see Table 5). While 10 out of 14 parents in these programs felt a sense of relief and cited a range of benefits to being in their own apartment, an additional six interviews from families in other residential contexts also commented on the importance of independent living for themselves and their children. Families appreciated the privacy and ability to cook their own meals, oversee homework, and receive guests. One young mother commented on how “it was nice to have a lease and my own keys and being able to come home and not have to live with people.” Because some families temporarily split during shelter stays (with older children or male partners living with friends), a few parents commented on the benefit of being reunited. For others, having their own place meant that their children were no longer embarrassed. According to a Rapid Re-housing case manager, the fact that some families had already secured housing meant they were better able to access additional school related resources (see Table 4). Program case managers also seemed to play an important role—in fact, six out of 14 parents in housing first programs felt that their program case manager connected them to education resources.

Yet, even with these advantages, transportation obstacles, neighborhood safety concerns, poor apartment conditions, and feelings of social isolation emerged as reoccurring barriers to productive school-related experiences. Commonly, parents and community stakeholders commented on how transportation obstacles led to young children ceasing attendance at high quality and well-liked early childhood programs. Seven out of 24 parents living in shelter recalled how their former independent housing (not as part of housing first programs) was

unsafe, unsanitary, and run by slum landlords. While families in housing first programs did not report such extreme circumstances, five out of 14 emphasized the limitations posed by the geographic location or condition of their more permanent residence.

One young mother in the Rapid Re-housing program discussed how the cold weather, her limited income, and the apartment situation limited her daughter's life opportunities. While her daughter could not play in the apartment because of the building's thin walls, her mother could not afford to take her out. In this instance, the child's educational opportunities were limited by the family's residential context. This same mother also highlighted another pertinent theme—how for some families, living in independent accommodations contributed to feelings of social isolation. She discussed how she lived with extended family growing up (albeit in overcrowded conditions) but now she felt disconnected. As she explained:

It's so hard to have friends. I don't even have a social life like, I am 22...I don't go out at all and like my friends talk about me, call me "grandma," and like I have to plan for me to go out. Like three months ago [crying] I was planning on going out this weekend. Now here it is this weekend and I can't go out.

For individuals like this mother, having access to a range of supportive services, offered in a service-rich shelter for example, may have been welcomed. In this sense, housing first programs may provide some families with an important sense of stability, but for others, the lack of a strong institutional attachment might be isolating.

#### **Doubled-up & education-related resources.**

Nearly all interviewed parents had also doubled up with family or friends out of economic necessity at some point in their lives—typically before or between shelter stays. Although one parent commented on the benefits of borrowing the host family's car, in 19 out of

38 interviews, parents viewed doubling up as having a holistically negative impact on their children's wellbeing (see Table 5). Themes of social isolation, a lack of privacy, and a lack of control over parenting emerged. Furthermore, parents often noted that doubling-up restricted their children's freedoms and increased their stress. One father commented that when he doubled up with his girlfriend's friends they "really didn't have a lot of patience with the kids, you know, the kids would start to you know, they weren't allowed to be kids." One mother, preferred shelter to doubling up: "I feel better being here [family shelter] than living with a family, my family, because I don't know, I just I did feel pretty uncomfortable there, and I felt like I was walking on egg shells." The stress of doubling up seemed to permeate the daily lives of many families.

For families doubled up in isolated areas, their children sometimes faced diminished access to educational opportunities. One school social worker explained how families doubled up in certain isolated neighborhoods "don't have equal opportunity [for alternative education programs] because some programs might only be a half day" while "other families who live within the city limits" have a much greater opportunity to use these resources because they have access to better transportation options. As this school social worker highlighted, doubled up families may face significant barriers to taking advantage of available off-site educational resources. Coupled with this, doubled up families often do not have access to a program case manager who may function to diversify their network or connect them to other resources.

### **Policy Knowledge & Residential Context**

In addition to these general trends, the interviews also revealed how the complex policy environment is understood and acted upon by parents and schools. Although parents were not explicitly asked about their knowledge of federal policies, it was evident that a number of parents

misunderstood or were confused about their children's particular rights under McKinney-Vento. This confusion can hinder full access to the supports inherent in the Act. Likewise, interviews with school social workers and other school personnel revealed inconsistencies and gaps in providers' knowledge on how policy changes at the federal, state, and/or local levels affect homeless and highly mobile families. Some school social workers were well aware of how residential context shaped students' unique needs. Yet others blatantly misunderstood or misused policies which served to curtail students' access to a range of supports and rights.

### **Parental knowledge.**

While some parents were clearly unaware of the extent of their rights, in other cases, shifting housing contexts complicated their understandings of policy. The following quote from a mother in a Rapid Re-housing program reflects this confusion:

Um, I think maybe if there is, if they are in the shelter like how my kids were, we were in the shelter and then we moved to apartment and we moved schools, I think they should try maybe see if the place can just keep on continuing transportation for those kids that moved schools so that they don't have to move schools in the middle of the year. Yeah because I think maybe that wouldn't upset them, I think because maybe if its like in certain ranges maybe 30 miles but I mean there is buses and somebody told me before that Voyage bus [bus company] does it to now, that they take kids to school far away and I am like, "wow, I wish I had known that."

This mother was clearly concerned about the impacts of school mobility on her children but unclear about her rights under McKinney-Vento. Because she secured permanent housing (through the Rapid Re-housing program) in the middle of a school year, her children did have the right to continue in their school of origin, but the Midtown district no longer had an obligation to

continue to provide transportation. In this sense, federal rehousing policies can create tensions with McKinney-Vento's aim to reduce school transfers. This reflects the residential context tradeoffs—her family benefited in many ways from living independently, but in shelter her family did have access to transportation to and from the school of origin. In addition to highlighting the tradeoffs, this quote also illustrates the confusion around McKinney-Vento—specifically amid shifting housing conditions. With reduced shelter stays and an increased use of housing first programs, this confusion may become all the more common.

### **School knowledge.**

A parent's knowledge of policy is likely to be related to the policy knowledge held by the school personnel. Nearly all school social workers felt that the Student and Families Program (SFP) was instrumental in building their capacity to understand McKinney-Vento and connect families to resources. Social workers mentioned the existence of SFP trainings—although most had not attended—as well as the role of the SFP in helping them interpret McKinney-Vento (such as decide who is homeless), arrange transportation, and access supplies such as notebooks or winter jackets. Yet, despite the powerful role of SFP, stakeholders' knowledge varied quite dramatically. Some school social workers, for instance, were well informed about how best to support their students who were experiencing homelessness. These individuals recognized how diverse living conditions shaped the needs of their students. They were also well positioned to ensure their students received the protections and supports inherent in the McKinney-Vento Act (see Table 6). In comparison, too frequently school social workers revealed significant gaps or even inaccuracies in their understanding. A number of social workers could not even recall the name of the Act; others outright misinterpreted its provisions.

Participants in two different schools raised the practice of, in the words of one participant, “closet cleaning,” or pushing families out of the school (see Table 6). The interviews suggested that closet cleaning is a response to the funding structure of McKinney-Vento and the cost of transportation. The following quotation from a school social worker highlighted how parents who became homeless wanted to stay in the same school but the school would often encourage them to leave:

Almost every parent that I have worked with would rather have their child maintain [stay in the same school]. I mean really, you get to know somebody, you get to know, you have a connection you are working on something. Usually we are encouraging families to go to a home of residence to where they are moved to [not the school of origin] because its easier for them to get them from there. I mean a lot of our families who are homeless do not have reliable transportation either so you know we just want them in school period... And I know there’s not money to do that and I know we are trying our best in the district...

Another school social worker, who admitted to closet cleaning, also incorrectly claimed that the law had changed so that schools no longer needed to provide transportation to the school of origin (see Table 6). Yet, highlighting inter-school variability, a principal at the same school explicitly discussed how his school did not coach children out.

Table 6

*Direct Quotes Regarding the Understanding of Relevant Policies and Unique Contexts*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Strong Understanding:</b> I guess first of all I find out "Do they have a safe place to stay?" And safety is the number one thing, you know. Is it, you know, "Are these people good people? Are you being mistreated?" Okay. Well, if they've got a safe place to stay and they can stay there, then I ask, "Well, you know, do you have, like, food? Do you have, you know, clothes? Do you have those kinds of basic needs being met, you know?" And for a lot of the older kids, some of them have jobs, you know. Um, one girl, we went online and we did the food share application. And so she was, even though she's living with all of these people, she's going to get, like, over \$200 a month in food stamps. So, you know, that helps a lot.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-School social worker (high school level)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Compared to:</b></p> <p><b>"Closet Cleaning":</b> ...they don't, they would have, you know, 5 years ago, transport, you know, if a parent decided they wanted their child to stay, they would transport them. In fact, they were even transporting kids from a half hour outside of town and sometimes it would be a 45-minute ride. They were doing a lot of that kind of stuff. But now, the policy really is, and what we're asked to do a little bit as social workers is to, you know, closet cleaning. We go through our lists and if somebody has moved, and they moved somewhere, they're in a different living situation, we're asked to look at, like, and some of it to me, some of it makes sense, you know. And, but I do think it's contributed to more mobility, school mobility, um, if you look at the definition of homelessness it's, you know, if they don't have their own home, they could be doubled up with someone but then they ask you to look a little bit closer.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-School social worker</p> |

As this section has illustrated, the funding structure of McKinney-Vento might create perverse incentives to school stability. “Closet cleaning” is particularly concerning for how it disrupts families’ social connections with school personnel, classmates, and other parents. Because transportation is often cited as the most expensive or challenging aspect of McKinney-Vento (NCHE, 2011) residential context is also likely to matter. Shelter students are clustered in a few physical locations but doubled up students, who compose 75% of all students who are experiencing homelessness, can be temporarily residing far away from their school of origin, making them particularly expensive to transport. Likewise, schools are not mandated to continue to provide transportation for students who leave shelter or doubled up situations and enter housing first programs—a fact which can encourage school personnel to “look a little bit closer” at their lists of students identified as homeless.

### **Family-School-Community Relations & Residential Context**

These policy understandings play a role in shaping the relationship between schools and families and schools and communities. To the extent that these relationships were built on meaningful understandings of the needs of families who live at the policy intersection, they could function to connect families not only to the resources inherent in McKinney-Vento but also to a range of personalized community-based supports. Despite the fact that McKinney-Vento mandates collaboration and shifts in federal rehousing policies likely necessitate purposive cross-sector action (Miller, 2009, 2011c, 2012b) the data also suggested that many school-based social workers continue to work in silos. One prominent exception to this—as revealed by the interviews with school personnel and with community stakeholders—was the collaborative relationships between some schools and Family Forces, a community-based service organization which aids families in addressing their basic needs by quickly connecting them to services. In

these instances, schools were better situated to respond to students and families. However, not all families lived in neighborhoods served by Family Forces or attended schools where school personnel had a fine-tuned understanding of their residential context.

### **Family-school relations.**

Despite shortages of information about policy-related rights, many parents had strong views about the ways in which schools facilitated or obstructed their families' educational opportunities. Ten out of 38 parents discussed the range of supports that school-based social workers provided to themselves and to their children and nine specifically identified Midtown's Students and Families Program (SFP), which oversees McKinney-Vento implementation in the school district. Parents mentioned accessing gas cards for transportation, school supplies, and even housing resources from school social workers and the SFP. For a number of families, school social workers also provided vital emotional support to the parents and/or child. Others however, felt that the school was insensitive about their particular residential context and unique barriers. Many parents commented on how their residential context made it challenging to visit the school and some of these parents felt that the school failed to still keep them well informed. Discussing her son's academic progress and her difficulties communicating with a new school, one mother remarked: "I don't really know what's going on." These themes highlight how the relationships between schools and families experiencing homelessness can be highly variable and dependent on the policy knowledge of schools and families.

### **School-community relations.**

Given the mandate for cross sector action inherent in McKinney-Vento, schools' policy knowledge may likely influence their commitment to working with the community. Similarly, this collaboration may also bolster the capacity of schools to understand and respond to students'

diverse needs. Yet for many stakeholders, most notably, school social workers, their practice occurred without meaningful community collaboration (see Table 7). When asked about their work with other organizations around issues of homelessness, most of the time school social workers listed a range of agencies, but generally these relationships were referral based rather than deeply collaborative. For instance, school social workers cited local shelters, food pantries, and respite centers, but contacted these organizations to connect families to them rather than to work and learn purposively together to meet needs. In fact, SFP distributed binders of community agency phone numbers to school social workers. While certainly a crucial resource, for some school social workers, the use of this binder was the sole or main way of connecting families to resources. Referrals can be crucial but the unique needs of families who are affected by both McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies are likely to be better met through more meaningful collaboration. The interviews suggested that a number of challenges, including the different focuses of agencies' work, often hinder effective cross sector action.

Table 7

*Direct Quotes Regarding Interagency Collaboration*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Effective Interagency Collaboration:</b> ...we have a meeting called the Homeless Group meeting where all the agencies in the Midtown area which serve homeless people in one way or another meet once a month. Usually the meetings are at the Sunnyside Park community Center. It's a big form of knowledge sharing. There is also a housing providers meeting which is more organized by Family Forces, which is an organization that is funded primarily through the county. They work with low-income families and have their offices actually based in low income neighborhoods, so if someone needs help with resources they can always call the neighborhood social worker. Sometimes they might need money to help prevent eviction or they might need money helping for utility bill, or they might need something from the FF [Family Forces] pantry. The FF social workers also do in-home visits and if they know that family might be in the risk of losing their housing; they can refer the family to Rapid Re-housing. Sometimes the school will also let the neighborhood social worker know, because they are connected with a lot of different things too. I would say in general, all of the organizations that work with the homeless community are all pretty well connected and in communication with each other.</p> <p>-Family shelter case manager</p> |
| <p><b>Compared to:</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <p><b>Working in silos:</b> I don't think we all [school social workers] communicate well enough in a manner that we are all moving in the same direction. I think that it has improved and is improving. But I think that there is a lot of working in vacuums. And that varies from person to person too. People are at different levels within their professional career. Some</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

are better than others. That makes a difference as well. Schools are always in some ways kind of this monstrous institution in and of themselves. I think people feel that they can't break in the doors. I think we work to try to get rid of some of that. I think some of it is still there. Ultimately, we are concerned about the students' academic achievement and safety of kids here. And their life outside what affects what goes on here. Communities on the outside are more concerned about families as a whole. I wish there was more integration because what happens, what happens here affects there and vice versa. I don't think we always get that though.

- School social worker

One crucial exception to this lack of collaboration involved Family Forces, a community-based supportive service that connects families to resources to help them meet their basic needs. In fact, 23 out of 41 interviews with school social workers identified Family Forces as crucial to their work. While some school social workers described this relationship as referral based, others spoke with Family Forces “almost every day.” On a regular basis, some school social workers (whose schools largely serviced specific low-income neighborhoods) met with a community-based social worker from Family Forces to discuss the needs of particular families and students—and notably, to consider their unique residential context. For a number of school social workers, these meetings and the existence of a Family Forces contact person facilitated their work and expanded their knowledge of policy. Others mentioned working on collaborative projects with Family Forces around issues such as parental engagement. Likewise, interviews with Family Forces staff revealed that they had meaningful relationships not only with schools but also with faith based and other community organizations. This quote from a Family Forces community social worker highlights how collaboration is central to their work:

We are community-based people you know...I think everybody at FF [Family Forces] believes in the idea of getting to know the neighborhood, getting to know who the stakeholders are, getting to know the leaders of who the families are here. Who are the service agencies that matter? Who are the people? And can we pull them together to get some work done?

Despite the particular job description of the interviewee, nearly all reflected on the struggles in addressing the unique needs of families at these policy intersections. Although McKinney-Vento may connect families to school social workers and homeless liaisons, the educational opportunities for families becomes fundamentally dependent on the expertise and willingness of key actors to collaborate with one another. While the role of Family Forces appears crucial to creating and maintaining meaningful collaboration, largely, the necessary skills and expertise varied greatly between and within schools.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore how families living at the intersection of the McKinney-Vento Act and federal rehousing policies experience the schooling process in one urban district. These policies have important impacts on students; the McKinney-Vento Act provides them with a range of supports while recent federal policies such as the HEARTH Act are shifting where and how they are living by promoting housing first programs over service-enriched shelters. Research suggests that students experiencing homelessness are at high risk for adverse educational outcomes including social and behavioral problems and low academic achievement (Buckner et al., 2001; Masten et al., 1997; Masten, 2011, 2012). Despite these risks, homeless and highly mobile students often exhibit great diversity in their social, emotional, and academic needs and outcomes (Cutuli et al., 2013; Masten, 2011, 2012; Murphy & Tobin; Obradović et al.,

2009). Building upon this research base, this study found that families have quite variant school-related experiences and that the complex and shifting policy environment fundamentally shapes these experiences. In this section, findings are discussed within the context of Nan Lin's (1999, 2000) network theory of social capital and recommendations based on this study are explored.

Nan Lin's work was helpful for this study because it examines the factors that affect both the *access to* and *mobilization of* education and housing related resources. Lin's network theory of social capital also emphasizes how closed homogenous networks (composed of trusting, tight knit relationships) and heterogeneous, bridging networks (composed of weaker bonds with more diverse people), can both be advantageous depending on what the individual needs or wants. Basic assistance with daily life and the maintenance of already acquired resources benefit from homogenous closed networks, while individuals aiming to improve their situation or gain access to new resources often require bridges and weaker ties with diverse people. As such, institutional affiliation can be helpful in enabling new life opportunities (Lin, 2000).

Complementing the work of Miller (2011d, 2012b), this study found that parents faced both barriers and opportunities to accessing and mobilizing educational resources depending on their residential context. Miller's work (2011d, 2012b) captured the voices of parents who were residing in shelter and congregate settings; this study extends his work by also incorporating the perspectives of parents who were living independently in housing first programs. This study also specifically focuses on how federal policies both independently and concomitantly shape the daily lives and schooling experiences for families. By embracing a policy perspective, it highlights the limitations of the empirical research to date on housing first programs (see Culhane, 2008; Gulcur et al., 2003; Tsemberis, 2010). While stable residency is certainly an important outcome, for families with children, housing first programs can have different

implications regarding the *access to* and *mobilization of* education-related resources. In particular, even though there are tradeoffs involved, there seems to be some educational benefits to shelter and some barriers to resources for families in housing first programs.

Echoing the findings in Miller (2011d), this study also found that shelter case workers served as vital bridges to wide-ranging resources for families living in shelter settings. Despite the fact that the rules and confined spaces of shelters created obstacles for many families, some also benefited from a range of on-site services such as early educational play sessions and parenting classes. While for a number of shelter residents, the other parents served as a distraction, for some others, they developed important bonding relationships. These relationships rarely diversified their networks, but they did lead to babysitting arrangements, thereby allowing parents time to access employment, housing, or school resources. In the context of Lin's social capital theory, families' attachments to shelters as institutions have important implications for their social network; in particular it can shape the creation of both bridging relationships with case managers and trusting, homogenous bonds with parents—both of which function to mold life opportunities.

Families in housing first programs had quite different daily experiences. Generally, many families commented on the benefits of independent living—from privacy, to entertaining, to reuniting as a family. Once again, program case managers served as vital bridges to wide ranging educational resources. Yet, for some families, transportation obstacles, poor housing conditions, and isolation served as barriers to mobilizing resources. Potentially, in these instances, the lack of an institutional affiliation was problematic.

Doubling up families generally reported holistically negative experiences characterized by social isolation, a lack of privacy, and parenting issues. Many parents felt that doubling up

restricted their children's ability to play and learn outside of school and also made it difficult to maintain household routines and rules that would support their children's social, emotional, and educational wellbeing. In the context of Lin's network theory of social capital, these families often did not have an institutional affiliation outside of the school and did not have access to shelter or program case managers who could serve as bridges. They also had limited access to educational services offered outside of school; by virtue of their residential status, they did not qualify for shelter programming and a lack of transportation sometimes restricted the use of available supports at alternative educational sites.

Building upon earlier work which found that parents were not well informed about McKinney-Vento and some school staff had limited capacity to assist families (Miller, 2009, 2011d, 2012a, 2012b; see also Julianelle, 2002), this study also found that some families were not well aware or were confused about their rights and school stakeholders' understandings and perspectives of policy varied greatly—despite the important role of the SFP. This confusion can be exacerbated by the intersection of McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies. To return to the mother who moved from a shelter into the Rapid Re-housing program and reluctantly transferred her children's school midyear, her situation explicitly highlights these policy intersections. By entering Rapid Re-housing, her family benefited from becoming stably housed but lost access to on site services at shelter. Simultaneously, while her children had the right to remain in their school of origin for the remainder of the academic year under McKinney-Vento, the district was no longer obligated to provide transportation—a fact which was not clear to the mother. As a result, her children changed schools midyear, which frayed their relationships with former classmates, social workers, and teachers. In this instance, federal rehousing policies such as the HEARTH Act created tensions with McKinney-Vento's aim to reduce school mobility.

These policy nuances can foster confusion and misunderstandings among both families and wide ranging stakeholders.

Interviews also revealed that schools—and in particular, the school social workers and the local EHCY program (such as SFP), can play vital roles in promoting productive educational experiences by facilitating resource access and addressing parental misunderstandings about McKinney-Vento. Accordingly, the ability of families to access and mobilize educational resources became fundamentally dependent on the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of crucial school staff that are tasked with interpreting and acting on policy. By interviewing 74% of Midtown social workers and taking a policy perspective, this study also addresses Groton et al.'s (2013) call for more interviews with school social workers and more research into the extent to which schools adhere to McKinney-Vento. The policy perspective of this study highlights how policy design, such as the funding structure of McKinney-Vento, can impact the work of relevant stakeholders and create unintended consequences such as “closet cleaning,” which prevents families from developing and maintaining important school-based relationships.

To serve as effective bridges for families—especially amid diverse residential contexts—stakeholders not only require an accurate understanding of relevant policies, but must also, as reflected in the literature (Miller, 2011c, 2011d, 2012a; Tucker, 2000) and mandated by policy, engage in cross-sector collaboration. This study revealed that while most school social workers commonly referred families to other agencies, meaningful interagency collaboration was often lacking. One exception to this was the relationships the community-based social workers at Family Forces created with many school social workers. Here, diverse stakeholders partnered to address the needs of specific families through collaborative meetings and cross-sector projects.

This cross-sector collaboration (where and when it existed) functioned to connect families to diverse and individualized educational and housing resources.

### **Recommendations**

Given that communities are shifting toward the housing first philosophy, this study has a number of recommendations for urban schools, urban communities, wide-ranging stakeholders, and multidisciplinary scholars. These include: developing and employing a common language around rehousing policies and interventions; creating infrastructures for understanding policy; prioritizing collaboration; advocating for increased McKinney-Vento funding and expanded provisions; and addressing the dearth of empirical work on students experiencing homelessness in different contexts.

#### **Develop and Employ a Common Language**

Stakeholders must develop and/or employ a common language around rehousing policies and interventions (see Fakhoury et al., 2002; De Jong, 2012). The implications of housing first programs on how families access and mobilize educational resources is likely to be shaped by a specific program or interventions' duration, quality and quantity of supports, and living conditions. Currently, however, conversations around rehousing are obstructed by the lack of common terminology in how to discuss these programs. The vague, overlapping, and at times contradictory ways in which “housing first,” “Housing First” and “Rapid Re-housing” are applied in practice makes it challenging for communities to share best practices with one another and for researchers and scholars to contribute to this emergent research area. Community stakeholders should carefully outline the characteristics of their rehousing programs while school personnel should be cognizant of similarities and differences when making referrals and considering the best interests of the children.

### **Create Infrastructure for Understanding Policy**

Schools and particular community-based organizations must also create infrastructures for considering how policy changes at federal, state, and/or local levels impact homeless and highly mobile families (Miller, 2012a, 2012b). Policies should not be restricted to those that are education-based such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act but should also consider rehousing policies such as HPRP and the HEARTH Act. While these policies unfold in unique ways at the local level, the study reveals that even in one urban community with a purposive and strategic response to homelessness (including awards from national homeless advocacy organizations), many important stakeholders are still not properly prepared to respond. In many localities, such as Midtown, training on these policy arenas is optional and thus depends on individual motivation. Similarly, this study also complements the work of Miller (2011d) by documenting how various key actors are central to providing families and students with access to educational resources. Thus, organizational learning should not depend on individual motivation, but must occur in a more holistic manner. This could take the form of district professional development that focuses on what these policies mean in the local context and encourages stakeholders to continuously revisit their approach to identifying and serving students and families (Pavlakakis & Miller, 2013).

### **Prioritize Collaboration**

Additionally, schools and communities must collaborate and coordinate to meet families' needs (Miller, 2011b, 2011d, 2012a; Tucker, 2000). While a requirement with McKinney-Vento, the policy shift towards decentralized housing deepens the importance of coordinating with a wider range of organizations such after-school programs, childcare centers, and landlord associations. Relationships between school social workers and shelter case managers will

continue to be important, but new connections with varied actors will become increasingly needed (Pavlakakis & Miller, 2013). Yet even though housing first programs are becoming increasingly used in lieu of the traditional shelter system, in most communities, the vast majority of students experiencing homelessness are still doubled up. Given the amount of stress doubling up places on families and the barriers it poses to resource access and mobilization, schools and communities should also consider creating positive and supportive relationships with host families.

### **Advocate for McKinney-Vento**

This study also highlighted the importance of McKinney-Vento and localized programs like Midtown's SFP (James & Lopez, 2003; Jozefowicz-Simbeno & Israel, 2006; Larson & Meehan, 2011; Miller, 2011b). Yet, the policy perspective also revealed how at times, recent federal rehousing policies can conflict with McKinney-Vento's aim for school mobility. Wide-ranging stakeholders such as school personnel, community leaders, and activists should advocate for increased funding for McKinney-Vento (Miller, 2011b). Increased funding could also potentially improve organizational learning capacities and deter "closet cleaning." More specifically, stakeholders should call for expanded provisions under McKinney-Vento; namely, the temporary right to transportation for students who move into permanent housing in the middle of the academic year. In the meantime, schools and communities should consider innovative ways to address this service gap, such as by partnering with a local non-profit to provide transportation or by using Title I monies.

### **Increase Scholarship on Student Homelessness**

Currently, the empirical literature on housing first programs narrowly focuses on Tsemberis' Pathways to Housing (Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012); scholars should not only

explore other rehousing programs but also be careful to avoid overgeneralizing findings on adults with treatment needs to other subpopulations (Kertesz et al., 2009). When examining families, scholars should extend beyond housing stability as a sole outcome (Bassuk & Geller, 2006) as well as consider its implications on education-related indicators. Multidisciplinary scholars should examine the intersection of organizations, policies, and education experiences for homeless and highly mobile families. While a number of organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and the NCHE, have made headway in following the trajectory of student homelessness, spreading awareness, and describing McKinney-Vento policy implementation, there is a need for empirical studies on the intersections of policies on the educational experiences of homeless and highly mobile students and their families. Researchers should examine different localities with distinct policy contexts—such as places that are at the forefront of the housing first philosophy as well as those where the linear model remains the norm (Pavlakis & Miller, 2013). Future research could build on this study by incorporating the viewpoints of additional actors who play pivotal roles in the educational experiences of homeless and highly mobile families, such as landlords who can be gatekeepers to permanent housing and school stability (Deluca & Rosenblatt, 2010) or the individuals who temporarily host their family members or friends in doubled up arrangements. Likewise, interviewing students themselves—particularly older students—would likely highlight new perspectives on school mobility, the advantages and disadvantages of different residential contexts, and importantly, the access to and mobilization of education-related resources.

Given that students experiencing homelessness typically suffer from low academic outcomes and contribute to achievement gaps in urban districts, there is an incentive for schools and communities to better understand their diverse needs and to work purposively towards

meeting them (Masten, 2012). To do so requires school personnel, community leaders, wide-ranging stakeholders, and scholars to understand and respond to the policies that both independently and concomitantly shape families' life opportunities.

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### **Chapter 3:**

## **Reaching All Families: Family, School, and Community Partnerships Amid Homelessness and High Mobility in an Urban District**

### *Abstract:*

Schools often struggle to build partnerships with homeless and highly mobile (HHM) families. These families are not homogenous; they live in and engage with schools from diverse residential contexts. Using Epstein's theory and framework and drawing from 132 interviews with HHM parents, school personnel, and community stakeholders in an urban district, results suggest that: a) interviewees had divergent experiences with family-school-community partnerships; b) some school actors were better positioned to engage HHM families than others; and, c) the diverse residential context of HHM families molded partnership building in unique ways. Theoretical implications and recommendations for practice and policy are discussed.

U.S. public schools, particularly in urban areas, have witnessed rising homelessness; in the 2012-13 school year, 1,258,182 students were identified—an 18% increase from 2010-11 (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2014). In addition to potential exposure to violence, hunger, and maltreatment (Gewirtz, DeGarmo, Plowman, August, & Realmuto, 2009), these students tend to experience high rates of school mobility, which often disrupts relationships with teachers and peers and complicates the consistent delivery of educational services (Lindsey & Sanchez, 2010; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). As a consequence of mobility and family stress, homeless and highly mobile (HHM) students can also suffer from behavior problems that can lead to social isolation (Lindsey & Sanchez, 2010; Rafferty, Shinn & Weitzman, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that these students tend to perform poorly on achievement tests and have low attendance and participation rates (Kennedy, 2007; Masten et al., 1997; Obradovic et al., 2009; Rafferty et al., 2004).

Yet, homelessness is not a homogenous experience; HHM students come to school from diverse residential contexts including shelter, doubling up (living with friends or family out of necessity), public spaces, and motels/hotels. This landscape has also been shifting (Miller, 2012; Pavlakis, 2014); recent government policies aim to address homelessness by placing families directly into independent living accommodations, which is changing where HHM students call “home.”

Parental involvement, or investments by parents in their children’s education, is well documented to impact educational wellbeing (Jeynes, 2007, 2012; Sanders, 2000; Sheldon, 2002). It is generally associated with a range of positive results for students and schools (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) including improved attendance and graduation rates, better test scores, and higher levels of student engagement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Henderson

& Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Research suggests that partnerships, where “educators, families, and community members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes” are particularly beneficial to students and schools (Epstein, 2011 p. 4; Sanders, 2001) and can even aid school reform (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Mapp, 2003).

However, schools often find it difficult to build relationships with families, particularly in low-income urban neighborhoods (Epstein, 2011; Floyd, 1998; Mapp, 2003; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Even though most parents report that they want to be involved with schools, parents with higher incomes, more education, and more familiarity with schools are more likely to remain engaged (Epstein, 2011). These challenges may be partly explained by parenting differences and social class; Lareau (1987) suggests that low-income parents may lack the time, money, and systems knowledge to engage in their children’s social and educational worlds in the same ways as middle-class parents. Yet, research also suggests that schools can do more to connect with parents who do not participate in traditional, middle class ways (Carreon, Drake & Barton, 2005; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

Parental involvement is particularly challenging for schools to foster with homeless families (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). However, very little empirical research comprehensively examines family, school, and community partnerships (FSCPs) with respect to HHM families. The purpose of my study is to contribute to this research gap and extend scholar and practitioner understandings of FSCPs with HHM families. My goal is to examine the ways in which families, schools, and communities experience partnerships in the context of homelessness and high mobility and how families’ diverse residential settings (Miller, 2012; Shields & Warke, 2010) can play a role in molding partnership building. With the assumption that responding to

homelessness requires purposive action both within and beyond school walls (Miller, 2012), I foreground the perspectives of not only schools and families but also wide-ranging community stakeholders.

### **Working with HHM Families**

All schools and districts must comply with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento). Reauthorized in 2001, it defines “homelessness” broadly, including not only students living in public spaces, shelters and motels/hotels, but also those doubling up (sharing housing out of economic necessity) and awaiting foster care placement (McKinney-Vento, 2001). The Act also provides a range of educational rights and supports to families and students experiencing homelessness, including a choice of schools with transportation upon request (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). McKinney-Vento helps shape FSCPs because it mandates that schools communicate with families experiencing homelessness in order to remove barriers to enrollment, improve parental involvement, and help students succeed (Swick & Bailey, 2004; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). It also requires designated district actors to work with a range of school and community staff (NCHE, 2008).

### **Importance of Partnerships and Promising Evidence**

Amid conditions of homelessness, certain parenting practices—such as encouraging children’s skills and exhibiting warmth—are particularly important for children’s development (David, Gelberg & Suchman, 2012; Gewirtz et al., 2009; Herbers et al., 2011; Miliotis, Sesma Jr. & Masten, 1999). Research suggests that homeless mothers strongly value their relationships with their children (David et al., 2012) and that close parent-child relationships are associated with high levels of parental involvement and good grades and behavior (Miliotis et al., 1999).

Likewise, partnerships are crucial to HHM students' success (Groton, Teasley & Canfield, 2013; Miller, 2011b; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge & Hudson, 1999).

Not only do HHM parents have high educational aspirations for their offspring (Stronge & Hudson, 1999; Tobin & Murphy, 2013), but in one study with 27 shelter parents by Yon and Sebastien-Kadie (1994), most parents reported positive views of the school, although some felt that educators needed to connect more with parents. Similar findings were reported in a study of nine homeless parents who were either living in agency-owned apartments or participating in a case management program (Grothaus, Lorelle, Anderson & Knight, 2011).

### **Challenges**

However, schools often struggle to identify and reach out to HHM families (Larson & Meehan, 2011; Tobin & Murphy, 2011). Some educators lack experience with homelessness (Groton et al., 2013) and others feel that HHM parents do not value involvement (Grothaus et al., 2011). In Groton et al.'s (2013) survey of 201 school social workers, the most commonly cited barrier to working with homeless students was "parent and family issues" including concerns about parental support and participation.

HHM families also face their own obstacles; homelessness can impair a parent's ability to nurture their children (Hausman & Hammen, 1993; Howard, Cartwright & Burajas, 2009). The daily chore of meeting basic needs (such as for shelter or food) can also trump parents' other concerns, such as education (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge & Hudson, 1999). Likewise, the conditions of homelessness can make it difficult to create home environments that stimulate children's development. For instance, it can be challenging to attain and store the appropriate books or to provide children with a variety of experiences (David et al., 2012). In one study, families experiencing homelessness who were in a program that provided wraparound support

services, actually scored better than disadvantaged housed families in their access to activities and conditions that promoted children's cognitive growth—perhaps reflecting the program's opportunities for structured play and learning (Howard et al., 2009).

Although there is a dearth of research on homelessness and parenting (Gewirtz et al., 2009), the extant literature suggests that HHM parents often feel depressed, have weak social supports, and lack positive parenting role models (Bassuk et al., 1996; Howard et al., 2009; Haussman & Hammen, 1993; Swick, 2009). HHM parents are often forced to parent in public, commonly confront negative stereotypes about their parenting, and may feel a general loss of control over their parenting (Bassuk et al., 1996; Boxill & Beaty, 1990; David et al., 2012; Hausman & Hammen, 1993; Howard et al., 2009; Lindsey, 1998; Miller, 2012; Paquette & Bassuk, 2009; Swick, 2009). Based on their past experiences and educational level, HHM parents may also feel uncomfortable at school or have little confidence in their ability to help with academic matters (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009; Swick & Bailey, 2004). Coupled with these barriers, parents are often uninformed about McKinney-Vento and the available school/community resources (Miller, 2011a; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge & Hudson, 1999).

In response, scholars have recommended a number of strategies to working with HHM families. These include providing access to parenting and content knowledge classes (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge & Hudson, 1999; Swick, 2009; Tobin & Murphy, 2013), connecting families to community resources (Grothaus et al., 2011; Groton et al., 2013; Miller, 2012; Murphy & Tobin, 2011), creating a nurturing school climate (Stronge & Hudson, 1999; Tobin & Murphy, 2013), encouraging coordinated action between schools and communities (Miller, 2009), challenging biases and stereotypes (Grothaus et al., 2011; Shields & Warke, 2010), learning about HHM families' needs and assets (Grothaus et al., 2011; Groton et al., 2013;

Shields & Warke, 2010; Swick & Bailey, 2004; Yon & Sebastien-Kadie, 1994) and developing unique responses to families' varied circumstances (Miller, 2012; Shields & Warke, 2010).

### **HHM Families and Residential Contexts**

At the time of identification in 2012-13, 75% of homeless students were doubled up (living with friends or extended family out of necessity), 3% were unsheltered, 6% were staying in motels/hotels, and 16% were in shelter (NCHE, 2014). Shelters are supervised facilities that are used for temporary living accommodations and can include both short and longer-term programs (NCHE, 2013). Families who enter shelter may choose or be required to split up—with teenagers doubling up or men and older boys attending separate male facilities (Lindsey & Sanchez, 2010).<sup>4</sup> As a consequence to separation, providers may not consider that some shelter residents are also parents or they may ignore the needs and assets of family members who are not physically present (Barrow & Laborde, 2008; Paquette & Bassuk, 2009).

Despite the diversity in residential context, there is little research that considers how it impacts schooling. Hallett (2012) suggests that the particular residential arrangements of doubled up families can mold educational participation. Yet most studies concentrate on families who are in emergency shelter—which may offer short-term housing with no guaranteed bed for the next night or may provide beds for a certain period of time—or compare sheltered families to their low-income housed counterparts (e.g. Bassuk et al., 1996; Howard et al., 2009; Miliotis et al., 1999; Yon & Sebastien-Kadie, 1994). Others do not draw comparisons across residential programs (e.g. Gewirtz et al., 2009; Grothaus et al., 2011). Miller's (2012) work is an exception—his mixed methods study examined families' places of homelessness including doubling up, emergency shelter, and longer-term shelters, and explored how these places mold school and community action.

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<sup>4</sup> Family shelter policies on male teenagers and grown men vary by program and location.

Yet, recent policy changes are restructuring where and how families live. In February 2009 the Obama Administration provided \$1.5 billion for a homeless prevention fund called the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP). Shortly afterwards, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Programs were reauthorized through a bill, which matched two earlier bills known as the HEARTH Act (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2009). The HEARTH Act focused on homeless prevention and encouraged communities to reduce shelter stays (Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2011). It also reauthorized the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), which strove to end family homelessness in a decade (USICH, 2010). Alongside the focus on prevention, HPRP, the HEARTH Act, and the USICH encouraged a different philosophy of service delivery for HHM families. Known as the housing first perspective, advocates of this approach view permanent housing as a human right and believe that people should be housed before they are offered other supports (Padgett, Gulcur & Tsemberis, 2006). Housing first advocates suggest that people should not be required to be sober or accept treatment before being housed and supports should not be mandatory (De Jong, 2012)—which often stands in contrast to shelter procedures.<sup>5</sup> Families in housing first are often placed in independent dwellings such as scatter-site apartments.

A few local communities who piloted housing first programs for families reported promising outcomes such as cost savings and decreased length of time in homelessness (NAEH, 2006), while data from the Beyond Shelter Program in Los Angeles suggests high rates of housing stability (USICH, undated). Yet, there is limited empirical research on the impact of

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<sup>5</sup> Associated with this perspective are Rapid Re-housing and Housing First (capitalized) programs and interventions, which although distinct, are often used synonymously by communities, service providers and researchers (Pavlakakis, 2014; De Jong, 2012). For the purposes of this study, any program or intervention that is aligned with the housing first philosophy will be referred to as housing first.

housing first for families (Pavlakakis, 2014; Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012). While Pavlakakis (2014) suggests that the parallel implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act and housing first may shape families' life opportunities in several unexpected ways, little is known about what housing first may mean for partnership building.

Here, I address these research gaps, build upon the work of Yon and Sebastian-Kadie (1994) and Grothaus et al. (2011), and contribute to the literature by examining FSCPs from the perspective of HHM parents, school personnel, and community stakeholders. By exploring the diversity in HHM families, I complement the work of Miller (2012), Shields and Warke (2010) and Hallett (2012) but also extend this work by considering housing first. I ask: (a) To what extent are FSCPs fostered with HHM parents? and, (b) how do the diverse residential contexts of homelessness and high mobility (such as living in shelter, doubling up, and residing in housing first) shape the opportunities and challenges for partnership building? To address these questions, I am informed by Joyce Epstein's theory of *overlapping spheres of influence* and framework of *six types of involvement for comprehensive programs of partnerships*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I am guided by Joyce Epstein's (2011) theory of overlapping spheres of influence and the framework of six types of involvement, which aim to assist schools in creating and sustaining partnerships with parents and the community. In addition to drawing organizational insights from Epstein's model and framework, I also assess it within the context of homelessness and high mobility.

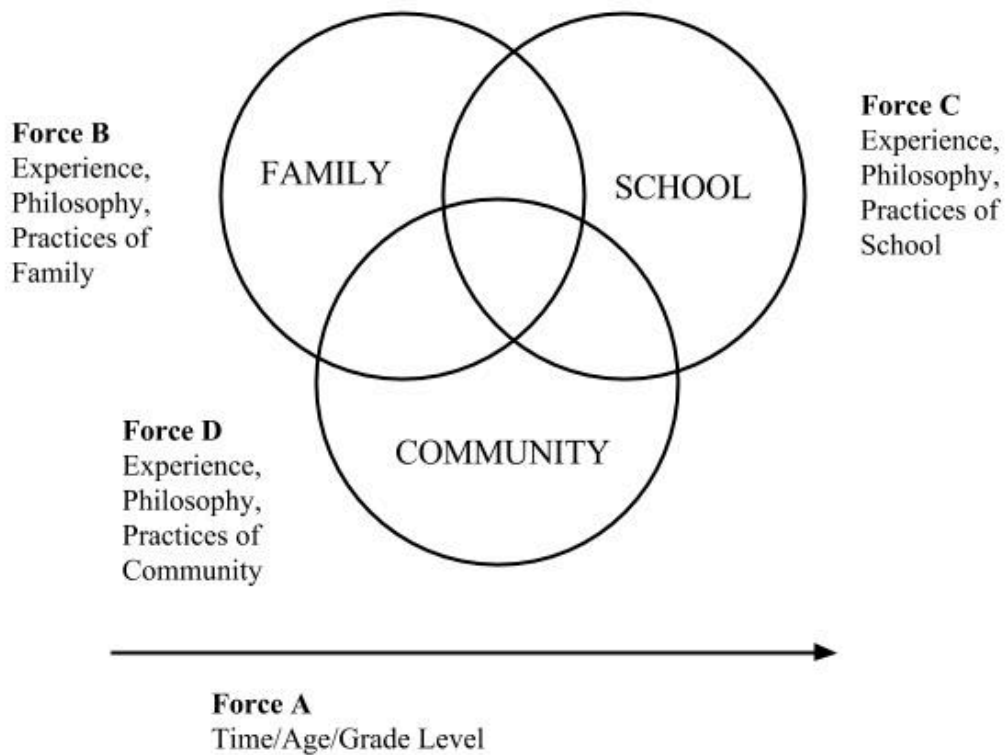
The theory of overlapping spheres suggests that partnerships are essential (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). For Epstein, partnerships—which emphasize collaboration in order to distribute knowledge, solve issues, celebrate victories, and guide students—are about shared

responsibilities between home, school, and community (Epstein, 2011). Other partnership literature, such as on community schools, reflects similar themes of information sharing and shared responsibility (Dryfoos, 2002; Quinn, 2005). Alternative conceptualizations of partnerships tend to also focus on trust, shared power (Shields, Gilchrist, Nixon, Holland, & Thompson, 2013; Warren, 2005), and “mutual self interest” (McDonald, Domingo, Jeffery, Pietanza, & Pignatosi, 2013, p. 578).

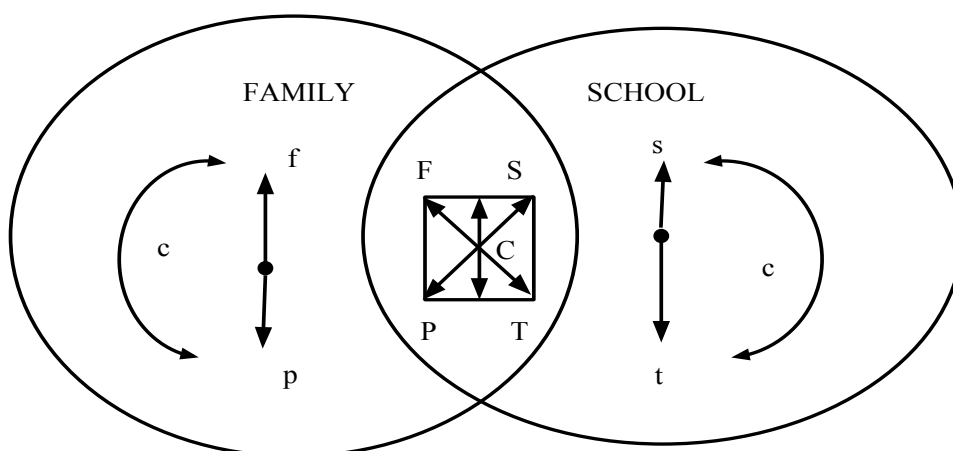
In Epstein’s theory and as illustrated in Figure 1, the external structure of the model, the extent to which families, schools, and communities influence one another is determined by the experience of families (Force B), the experience of schools (Force C), and the experience of communities (Force D), as well as time and the age/grade of the child (Force A). Maximum overlap in the spheres of influence occurs when partnerships are created (Epstein, 2011).

In Figure 2, the internal model, the inter-and-intra organizational interactions are illustrated. The family (f) and parent (p) interactions as well as school (s) and teacher (t) interactions happen separately from one another. Yet, the Family (F) and School (S) interactions as well as the Parent (P) and Teacher (T) interactions occur across these realms. Family (F) and School (S) interactions include organizationally focused communication while Parent (P) and Teacher (T) refer to interactions about an individual child (Epstein, 2011).

The theory of overlapping spheres argues that there are *school-like families*, where children are rewarded for success, children are provided tasks similar to those in school, and children are encouraged to be active learners. Likewise, there are *family-like schools* where the schools aim to advocate for their students, students are meant to feel as though they belong to a “school family,” and the uniqueness of individuals is rewarded (Epstein, 2011, p.36).



*Figure 1.* Overlapping spheres of influence (external structure). Reprinted from *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools (Second Edition)* (p. 32), by J. Epstein, 2011, Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Copyright 2011 by Westview Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Reprinted with permission.



KEY: Intra-institutional interactions (lowercase); Inter-institutional interactions (uppercase)

f/F = Family  
s/S = School  
c/C = Child  
p/P = Parent  
t/T = Teacher

Note: The full model includes  
co/CO=Community  
a/A = Agent from community/business

Figure 2. Overlapping spheres of influence (internal structure). Reprinted from *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools (Second Edition)* (p. 32), by J. Epstein, 2011, Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Copyright 2011 by Westview Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Reprinted with permission.

Epstein's (2001, 2011) framework also outlines six types of involvement which include:

- *Parenting*: Helping families set up home environments to support children as students.
- *Learning at home*: Providing guidance to families about how to support students with their homework and other curriculum-based decisions, activities, and planning.
- *Communicating*: Creating effective forms of two-way communication between schools and homes about school programs and children's progress.
- *Volunteering*: Recruiting and organizing parental help/support.

- *Decision-making*: Including parents in decisions of school; fostering parent leaders.
- *Collaborating with the community*: Identifying and using community resources/services in order to improve school programs, family practices, and student development/learning.

Schools can use a number of practices to enhance each type of involvement, but each comes with challenges. Epstein (2001) argues that the types also require redefinitions: “the redefinitions redirect old notions so that involvement is not viewed solely as or measured only by ‘bodies in the building’” (Epstein, 2001, p.410).<sup>6</sup>

Some scholars have critiqued the dominant discourse around family-school relations, suggesting that it ignores power dynamics (Cooper, 2007; de Carvalho, 2001; Fine, 1993), praises middle-class actions through a focus on parents’ behavior (Barton et al., 2004; Lareau, 1987, 2002), and may marginalize more subtle parenting acts such as holding high expectations and communicating with their children, which may matter more for achievement (Jeynes, 2010). This body of work suggest the importance of sharing power (Cooper, 2007), emphasizing the needs and resources of families in specific communities (Grau & Oen, 2009), focusing on love and respect for families over guidelines for parents (Jeynes, 2010), and forming a reorientation away from what parents do and towards how they understand engagement and how it relates to the broader context (Barton et al., 2004).

While these perspectives raise important questions and inform my analysis, Epstein’s model and framework (1995, 2001, 2010, 2011) has evolved over time to reflect broader notions of involvement, an increased focus on how schools can do more to include all families, and an expanded emphasis on the broader community, making it more inclusive and applicable to diverse contexts. In its recent reiterations, it also allows for a close examination not only of

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<sup>6</sup> Those unfamiliar with Epstein’s redefinitions should consult Epstein (2011), Table 5.2 *Challenges and redefinitions for the successful design and implementation of the six types of involvement*,” pp. 398-399.

school-family relations but also of the linkages between community organizations and schools and families—a vital component to addressing student and family homelessness (Miller, 2012). Epstein’s paradigm is not without its limitations; however, it is a dominant model that influences policies and practices in many U.S. schools and districts. Its predominance in practice coupled with the fact that it has not (to my knowledge) been evaluated in the context of homelessness, further justifies its use. Even though scholarship on partnerships is growing (Epstein, 2010), more research is needed that examines the diversity of parents (Carreon et al., 2005; Epstein, 2001). I contribute to this research gap and consider Epstein’s theory and framework within the diverse context of HHM families in an urban district.

### **Context and Urban Education**

*Urban* is a complex and loaded term that often comes with assumptions beyond density and population size. It may suggest that the community experiences high poverty, crime, and general despair and that its schools are low performing. In popular discourse, the term has even been applied to schools that serve a large proportion of students of color, irrespective of geography (Milner, 2012). As such, it is important that I clarify how I conceptualize and apply these terms to my study site. I recognize that urban areas often confront similar economic and social challenges but I acknowledge that they are also places with many assets. Midtown,<sup>7</sup> the context for this study, is a Midwestern U.S. city that confronts rising poverty with limited resources but like many urban areas, also has unique school and community strengths. I categorize Midtown’s schools as urban because they are located in a medium-sized city and also share “some of the same scarcity of resource problems” as larger geographic places (Milner, 2012, p.559).

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<sup>7</sup> All proper nouns are pseudonyms.

Midtown was an ideal study site for several reasons. First, the district prioritizes partnerships and embraces Epstein's theory and language in its parental involvement and partnership guidance. Second, in response to rising student homelessness, it has a dedicated program (unique for its size) that oversees McKinney-Vento implementation. Since 2009, the city has also embraced the housing first philosophy for families.

### **Methods**

Part of a larger case study of Midtown, this study draws from 132 qualitative semi-structured interviews with HHM parents (n=38), school personnel (n=76), and community stakeholders (n=18). At the time of interview, parents were staying in a number of different residential contexts including a traditional emergency shelter (n=19), a rotating church-based emergency shelter program for families (n=5), and two housing first-style programs (n=14). Parents were also asked to discuss their previous housing settings, including doubling up. At the end of the interview, parents were given a 10-ride adult bus pass to thank them for participating.

An Assistant Professor and three graduate students conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed all interviews. The research team reached out to all of the district's school social workers (interviewing 74% of them). Afterwards, snowball-sampling techniques were used to identify additional school personnel. School participants (n=76) included 41 social workers, seven classroom teachers, five principals, two school psychologists, six school nurses, seven administrative assistants, four bilingual resource specialists, one parent-teacher organization president, one interventionists, and two guidance counselors. Community stakeholders who served Midtown families and children were identified through a countywide homeless directory coupled with snowball sampling. Community stakeholders included emergency shelter

providers, housing first caseworkers, county-based community social workers, and employees of other local service organizations.

All transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo 10. I conducted all the coding and analysis for this study. Preliminary open coding began during the transcription process—as Rapley (2007) highlights, through transcription, the investigator becomes much more familiar with the data. After transcription, I engaged in a slow, line-by-line reading of each transcript, which allowed me to identify emergent themes that were embedded in the interviews through an open, inductive process (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I then analyzed the data in relation to Epstein’s theory and framework. Table 1 illustrates an example of the data analysis process.

Table 1

*Data Analysis Process*

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Quote       | <p>“I think <i>out of that meeting with mom</i> is where <i>came some of these ideas</i> like checking in with her son on a daily basis if she was okay with that. If we could do the cool-down pass if that would work...he also had some anger issues so we talked about supporting him, you know, in that area. I also got him involved in a kind of leadership role, where we’re training students to be what’s called circle keepers in restorative justice circles. And we have a <i>partnership</i> [with local non-profit] and so, he was one of the kids I recruited to be one of the circle keepers, and so I really talked that up with mom about how I do see some really strong leadership potential in him and that I want to, you know, capitalize on that...and he was one of my rockstars in that group so it was really, it was really a positive thing. And I did, when I had the <i>conversation</i> with mom yesterday, I mentioned to her that I really thought he did a nice job in there.”</p> <p>-Middle school social worker</p> |                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Open Coding | <p>Positive.news.families;<br/> Asset.communication;<br/> (Schools providing positive feedback to families; strength-based interactions).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>Evidence.collaboration<br/> (Evidence of collaboration between community and school).<br/> School.comm.benefits<br/> (Positive outcomes from working with community)</p> |

|                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Epstein                    | <p><i>Type: Communication</i></p> <p><i>Two way communication; partnerships with parents.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p><i>Type: Collaborating with Community</i></p> <p><i>Partnerships with community; integrating community resources to improve school programs, family practices and student development.</i></p> |
| <i>Family-like schools</i> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Finding                    | <p>Some school stakeholders engaged HHM parents in meaningful partnerships, which served to advance student development.</p>                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>Collaborations with community organizations can strengthen HHM students' opportunities.</p>                                                                                                    |
| Quote                      | <p>“...with me being an independent person I am, <i>living with somebody else</i>, seeing how they <i>run their household</i> and how I run my household was different, so when things are not going right...not on the same page—it gets really hard.”</p> <p>-Parent discussing doubling up</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Open Coding                | <p>Doubledup.parenting<br/>(Parenting in doubled up arrangements).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Epstein                    | <p><i>Type: Parenting</i></p> <p><i>Challenges establishing home environments to support children as learners.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Finding                    | <p>Some parents struggled to parent and take care of their family while they were living in someone else's home.</p>                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

## Findings

HHM parents, school personnel, and community stakeholders often reported divergent interpretations of and experiences with FSCPs. In some ways, the diverse contexts also impacted parents' opportunities to actively promote their children's educational wellbeing (Table 2). First I examine the findings on the home context and learning and then I turn to the quality of family, school, and community interactions. Afterwards I examine the unique experiences of families living in shelter, residing in housing first, and doubling up.

### Home Context and Learning

Interviews with HHM parents revealed that they valued education and wanted their children to be involved in the school and community. As a mother in shelter told her son, "go [with] all the stuff they have at school, go ahead and take it, its good...when you get in high school that's what counts, extracurricular." In other cases, parents initiated involvement in order to encourage socialization, provide role models, and promote growth.

Some HHM parents discussed the importance of homework routines, encouraging their child to do his or her best in school, and showing that they cared about school. Nine parents discussed helping, overseeing, or enriching their children's academic wellbeing at home. A shelter parent reported, "whatever they are doing at school, I try to implement at home." Four parents emphasized regular reading routines while for others, math skills and writing quality were practiced at home.

Other parents commented on the challenges they faced in maintaining homework routines, overseeing their children's academic progress, and enriching their children's education. Seven parents felt that their own education played a role in shaping the extent to which they could help their children. Some had to reach out to friends or caseworkers for homework

assistance and four parents explicitly asked for more guidance from schools. Six parents felt that their children had little to no homework to do at home—half were grateful but others felt it made it harder to keep track of their children’s progress.

**School and community perspectives.**

Ten community stakeholders discussed HHM families’ challenges in constructing a home context that supported learning but not all school personnel were aware of families’ obstacles. For instance, a school social worker blamed children’s struggles to stay awake during class not on structural challenges of having a quiet place to sleep, but on the parents for “a lack of supervision” and poor parenting. Likewise, an elementary teacher, who often asked her students to read to a parent and have the parent initial a form, explained:

I don’t want to say that I reduce my expectations but when I send stuff home day after day and he’s gone to a different address every day and none of it comes back...I just feel like if I keep sending books home, we’re not going to have any books left in the bookroom...I guess my expectations do change when the kids fail to bring stuff back—its just a loss of resources and I feel like it’s a waste of my time and energy to continue to try.

The teacher stopped assigning him any homework, denying him equitable learning opportunities.

Yet, eight stakeholders were well aware of the barriers parents faced in helping their children. Some focused on maintaining high expectations for all children while still responding to their circumstances. As a third grade teacher declared, “I still try to maintain those expectations and yet, you know, gentle balance.” A bilingual specialist for instance, had HHM students make a list of missing assignments and then helped them develop a manageable plan for

completion. While her actions were not the norm, one kindergartener teacher stressed the importance of guiding her students' parents through homework:

I'll make like a little kit of at home work they can do and then I'll go to the home and actually show the family how to work with the material that I provided. I show what I put together and kind of like physically model how to do it.

These types of actions created the foundation for high-quality interactions with families.

### **Quality of Family, School and Community Interactions**

While at some schools, direct relationships were encouraged between HHM parents and teachers, in a couple, the school social worker was the main source of contact. As a principal explained, "we've streamlined it into sort of a primary contact person that those teachers kind of feed information through. It ends up being Mary, our school social worker." A teacher noted, "I focus on the kid, the child. I let the social worker deal with, not deal with but develop their relationship with the parent because there's a lot of trust involved in this kind of stuff."

Community stakeholders, however, were not always aware of schools' external communication practices.

Schools were more likely to forge close relationships with families at the elementary level than during the middle or high school years. As high school social worker explained, "kids do not want their parents involved so and we are also a school where kids are held responsible for how they are doing. They are the ones taking responsibility for that." Likewise, a shelter caseworker reported, "the most challenging school staff for me to communicate with are generally the high school." She felt that elementary personnel were much more responsive.

Across grades however, nearly all school personnel commented on the challenges of interacting with parents because of outdated addresses, disconnected phones, and the general

stress of homelessness. Many school personnel also felt frustrated when they arranged transportation for a parent and the parent still did not come to school. An interventionist highlighted how she unsuccessfully arranged for a mother to come to the school three or four times in hopes that the mother, if she saw how well her son did in an intervention, “would be more likely to get up and get him in a taxi.” Because she did not attend and her son had poor attendance, the school was “going to pick other students to take that place.” In this case, the inability of the mother to attend the school restricted her son’s educational opportunities.

Other school stakeholders were well aware of the multifaceted obstacles. A school guidance counselor highlighted that “there are just so many barriers” for families such as childcare and work schedules, and that the schools did not always have the resources, staff, or flexibility to go to parents. She declared, “there are certainly things that we could do as a school I think to make things better.” Twelve school social workers discussed “meeting families where they are at”—reflecting a commitment to working with parents despite their instability—and many school stakeholders prioritized checking in and relationship building. If a first grade teacher could not reach an HHM parent, he would “walk the kids home, wherever they’re staying.” Similarly, a kindergarten teacher used different outreach methods based on students’ home contexts, “if they don’t have a telephone I might send frequent notes home or a lot of times our families who are homeless are living with other family members so we’re able to reach them through other family members.” Likewise, in Table 1, a school social worker described the outcomes of a brainstorming meeting that led to positive schooling experiences. Yet even within a school, there were variations in how individual stakeholders communicated with families—some social workers and teachers visited homes while others “might not even have contact” with an HHM family.

According to school stakeholders, the financial resources available at each school to transport parents to the building varied greatly posing structural barriers to traditional definitions to *involvement*. Five school-based interviewees highlighted how many parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) isolated HHM families because they held inaccessible school events (such as silent auctions) and followed social norms that were unfamiliar and uninviting to many parents. However, these barriers were not always formidable; at one school a new PTO president worked to shift the PTO culture, which drew a more representative sample of parents to the school.

### **Family perspectives.**

Given the challenges, it is not surprising that sometimes families reported low quality interactions with schools. Eight parents had holistically negative impressions of the school staff or felt that they were not well informed about their children's progress. For 13 parents, communication with the school was limited to Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Seven parents noted that the school only called when there was "bad news." A housing first caseworker reiterated this concern:

Usually it's only when a problem arises that families are really contacted unfortunately...But most of the parents have been really responsive about trying to problem solve. A lot of it is such a long-term problem that its really frustrating when they keep getting phone calls after they tried to implement these changes...

Reflecting this, a mother in shelter explained about her son's school:

I feel like I do not know who is who... I haven't even been to the school once but I had to walk up and get him one day so I had to have someone else come with me because I

didn't know where it was...I think that as long as he is fine, I kind of like the idea that I don't hear from his school.

As such, there were sometimes formidable barriers to forging high-quality interactions between schools and families.

Despite the challenges, 18 parents had holistically positive perceptions of their children's school and or staff members. Seven parents felt that they were always up to date with their children's progress and that the school included them in meaningful ways. A mother discussed her interactions with school:

I started going over and beyond...like, "call me when this goes on. Please don't let me know after the fact. I need to know when it's happening so I can help you out, troubleshoot." And so I just do drop-ins at the school to see what's going on...I've been more active and more in communication with the schools and stuff, and he's been doing way better...

Only four parents volunteered in class or regularly attended events at school and not one reported serving in a decision-making capacity. In addition to transportation and work barriers, a number of parents felt that finding housing or helping their children at home took priority.

### **School and community interactions.**

Although stakeholders recognized how collaboration could facilitate positive relationships with families, there was great variation in the quality of interactions between schools and the community. As a school social worker explained:

Working closely with community agencies really helps because they know the students and they can give us some feedback and some perspective on where they're

coming from and also provide services outside of the school that we necessarily can't provide.

Yet, stakeholders were also aware of the challenges including: managing with few resources and little time, dealing with high staff turnover, having a history of “doing things in isolation and towers,” and overcoming “long standing turf issues.” As a school social worker highlighted, community stakeholders may also have different objectives:

People in housing programs are often times more focused on meeting basic needs...they often use schools in the same way that many parents do. Kids are at school—check. They are not as engaged in the learning process in terms of why students have homework and why we should go to these events...Shelter people are working to connect people with housing, not necessarily schooling.

Given these challenges, most commonly, schools simply provided referrals to community organizations rather than built collaborative partnerships with them. As a school social worker explained, “most of the time the parents can, I can give them a resource list that's kind of categorized. They can read it. They can make the call.” More than a quarter of school social workers discussed how they relied on a binder, provided by the district, of community organization phone numbers.

However, in certain cases, collaborative partnerships were built between schools and community stakeholders. Some school personnel met with neighborhood-based community social workers (who were funded by the county) on a regular basis to share information and address the specific needs of HHM families. A county community social worker explained the relationship with schools, “school social workers are trapped in their buildings...so it is very difficult for them to get out into the neighborhood. I think that's why they like us, because we sit

out there and work with them...” In certain cases, these partnerships led to changes in school-level parental involvement programs, or connected families to resources that were personalized to their residential context.

### **Experiences by Residential Context**

In some ways, families’ experiences were shaped by their residential context. Nineteen parents, for instance, discussed how their residential context posed unique challenges to their parenting routines or their ability to establish home environments that supported their children as learners. Likewise, families received varying degrees of attention from schools based on where they were living.

#### **Shelter.**

As highlighted in Table 2, parents in shelter felt that staff and other parents’ judgments of their parenting were stressful and counterproductive, while shelter rules and a lack of privacy prohibited them from setting up ideal home contexts, such as choosing what or when their children ate. As a single mother in shelter reported “it’s just like people always got something to say about how you should raise your child.” Other shelter parents expressed frustration that they were parenting from afar—with some children doubled up. Others, who had adolescents living with them, felt that the strict curfews and lack of privacy conflicted with teenagers’ needs to be independent. Yet, a couple of parents highlighted how having three meals a day helped to ease their stress and that they benefited from parenting resources and on-site services.

Because parents needed to find housing and shelters lacked adequate space to do work, helping children with homework proved challenging. As a father reported, “I do feel like I haven’t been as involved with the teachers and just kind of sitting down with the kids and going you know or reviewing what they did for the day.” Yet, families living in shelter sometimes

found on-site supports to be helpful—one shelter provided early learning classes, which were well received by parents, while another provided tutoring (Table 2).

Families in shelters also had access to caseworkers who sometimes played important roles in fostering relationships between families and schools, such as by attending meetings and serving as a liaison (Table 2). Yet, the degree of interaction depended on the family's goals, child's age, and individual school stakeholder. Influenced by the caseworkers as well as by school stakeholders' impressions of which families required the most help, schools reported communicating more frequently with families living in shelter compared to the families who were doubled up or in housing first.

### **Housing first.**

Many families in housing first described their current residence as “a nice apartment” or “the greatest apartment I ever had.” Parents in housing first appreciated controlling bedtimes and meals, reuniting with children or partners, and having a caseworker that could help facilitate family-school interactions. As one mother in housing first stated, “it is better when they have a stable home and they know what is going to happen when they come and when they leave.” Families now had space to store books and toys and “a kitchen table to do homework.” Another parent noted how her housing first placement allowed her to volunteer at school.

Yet, housing first parents sometimes suggested that their apartments were low quality, too small for their family, or posed safety concerns. One mother explained:

I have two kids, I have a boy and a girl and so it's a small apartment, one bathroom. It's like a studio you know. So picture this, I have a five-year-old, she is almost six—getting her ready for school you know, and she wants to play and the baby is in there—but anyway you know, its kind of hard.

Depending on the apartment's location, some parents were far from work, their social support networks, or other community resources, leaving them feeling isolated.

### **Doubled up.**

Doubling up posed many obstacles to creating a home context which supported learning, namely because there was a lack of space and strained relationships amongst the adults particularly around parenting and the division of labor (Table 2). When forced to double up with her mother, one woman explained, "me and my mom clashed, parental styles." Another mother described doubling up as a "headache" because "if someone else does not use the same cleanliness, then you have issues."

Doubled up parents did not have access to on-site parenting resources or caseworkers. At the same time, schools often felt that doubled up parents were more likely to become involved in education than families living in shelter (Table 2). As a principal explained:

We have several parents who are "doubled up" with someone else, but it's pretty much quasi-permanent...And I see those parents having more involvement at the school. We'll send them cabs to come to our carnival, you know, to get them involved. But typically, they're doubled up, living with someone.

Because schools often felt that doubled up families had fewer needs, school social workers were less likely to reach out. As a school social worker described, "we have other families that are technically homeless because they double up and those families tend to not need as much in terms of resources and time and energy from me specifically." A school social worker explained how "the kids that are going in and out of different motels and shelters struggle...they struggle a little bit more," compared to "the families that are doubled up [who] seem to be a bit more stable."

However, most HHM parents commented that doubling up was the “most stressful time” for themselves and their children. One parent reported that doubling up was dangerous for her young children because she could not childproof someone else’s home. These families may have benefited from respite and other support—services that the community provided. As a school social worker expressed, “the doubled up people, I’m finding, just don’t realize what’s out there to help them. I think this is a real break in the system.” As the quote suggests, if schools are not connecting these families to resources, they may have limited access through other channels.

Table 2

*FSCP Considerations by Residential Context*

|                  | Shelter                                                                                                                                                                         | Housing first                                                                                                                                    | Doubling up                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parenting        | <p>Challenges: parenting in public; shelter rules; lack of privacy; poor sleeping arrangements; no control over meals.</p> <p>Benefits: on-site parenting resources; meals.</p> | <p>Challenges: apartment conditions; isolation; no on-site parenting resources.</p> <p>Benefits: control over routine; family reunification.</p> | <p>Challenges: lack of privacy; poor sleeping arrangements; stressed relationships with host family over parenting and division of labor; no on-site resources.</p> |
| Learning at home | <p>Challenges: lack of space for homework.</p> <p>Benefits: on-site services.</p>                                                                                               | <p>Challenges: no on-site programming.</p> <p>Benefits: easier to store books/supplies; space for homework.</p>                                  | <p>Challenges: lack of space for homework; no on-site programming.</p>                                                                                              |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Com.                         | Challenges across residential contexts, but particularly when families are highly mobile; for families doubling up, schools could sometimes communicate through host family. |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                            |
| Vol. & Decision Making       | Finding housing and addressing children's individual needs as priority.                                                                                                      | Parents may find it easier to volunteer once housing is settled. | Schools perceive doubled up as better able to volunteer, yet parents found doubling up to be particularly stressful.                       |
| Collaborating With Community | Benefits: schools focus on connecting shelter families to resources; caseworkers.                                                                                            | Challenges: not priority for schools.<br>Benefits: caseworkers.  | Challenges: schools less likely to connect doubled up families to resources; families may be less likely to know about community services. |

### Discussion

I aimed to examine FSCPs from the perspective of HHM parents, school personnel, and community stakeholders. Building upon earlier work on parental involvement and homelessness (Grothaus et al., 2011; Yon & Sebastian-Kadie, 1994) and also addressing the diversity in HHM families (Hallett, 2012; Miller, 2012; Shields & Warke, 2010), I examined a medium-sized city and asked, “to what extent are FSCPs fostered with HHM families?” and “how do the diverse residential contexts of homelessness and high mobility shape the opportunities and challenges for partnership building?” I found that HHM parents, school personnel, and community stakeholders often reported divergent interpretations of and experiences with FSCPs. While some school

stakeholders engaged in two-way communication with parents and collaborated in meaningful ways with community stakeholders, others were less well positioned to work with HHM families. Even when relationships were fostered, more could often be done—particularly in ways that parents valued the most such as communication and learning at home. Although partnerships were not always shaped by the residential context, in a number of ways, living in shelter, doubling up, or residing in housing first molded the opportunities to engage in their children’s education (Table 2). In this section, findings are connected to the literature and tied back to Epstein’s concept of “family like schools” and “school like families.” I also suggest some theoretical implications and recommendations for practice and policy.

### **Family-like Schools**

In family-like schools, the relationships between students and teachers are paramount and there is a focus on personal attention and recognition of students’ individual progress (Epstein, 2011). In many cases, Midtown schools employed best practices that were aligned with family-like schools, such as focusing on unique needs (Grothaus et al., 2011; Shields & Warke, 2010; Yon & Sebastien-Kadie, 1994) and collaborating effectively with the community (Grothaus et al., 2011; Groton et al., 2013; Miller, 2012).

Yet, community collaboration was often limited, deficit-based communication sometimes dominated, and there was scarce evidence of effective partnerships with HHM parents at the high school level. Miller (2012) emphasized the necessity of developing unique responses based on families’ context and Graue and Oen (2009) highlight the importance of focusing on the needs and resources of households in specific communities. I mirror this focus and suggest that schools can learn more about HHM families and students’ residential contexts and then tailor responses appropriately.

However, I highlight how sometimes school personnel *are* “differentiating”—but only in the sense that they are more aware of and attuned to the needs of students in shelter than to students who are doubled up or in housing first. The perception that doubled up families are stable and better positioned to be involved was not substantiated by the parent interviews. Most HHM parents described conflicts with host families about parenting and the division of labor and reported little to no educational advantages to doubling up—a finding mirrored by Miller (2012) and Pavlakis (2014). Because parents reported on doubling up retrospectively, my findings may disproportionately capture its challenges. However, doubling up is often a precursor to shelter entry and is commonly time-limited (Hallett, 2012). Given this, I suggest that many doubled up families may require more support than schools perceive. Likewise, with the federal emphasis on housing first over traditional shelter, it is increasingly important that schools understand and address the ways in which housing first may shape FSCPs.

I also suggest some limitations to “family-like schools.” Some school actors responded to students’ diverse contexts by denying HHM students comparable learning opportunities to their peers (such as by not assigning them homework or removing them from a successful intervention)—yet research suggests the importance of maintaining high expectations (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Likewise, HHM parents sometimes used homework as an important vehicle to parental involvement. Not sending homework home at all—rather than redesigning it—effectively eliminated this partnership opportunity, hindering the development of “school-like families.”

### **School-like Families**

According to Epstein (2011), school-like families are well informed about how to help their children with school, establish and maintain stimulating learning environments, and tend to

involve children in active learning. I found that some HHM families emphasized the importance of their reading and homework routines while a couple of parents even created their own academic tasks. Given parents' limited economic resources and high stress levels, it was interesting that many parents emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities. This focus may reflect poor families' "efforts toward keeping children safe" (Lareau, 2011, p.66) or the fact that families *are in the system* and perhaps encouraged by caseworkers to enroll their children in programming.

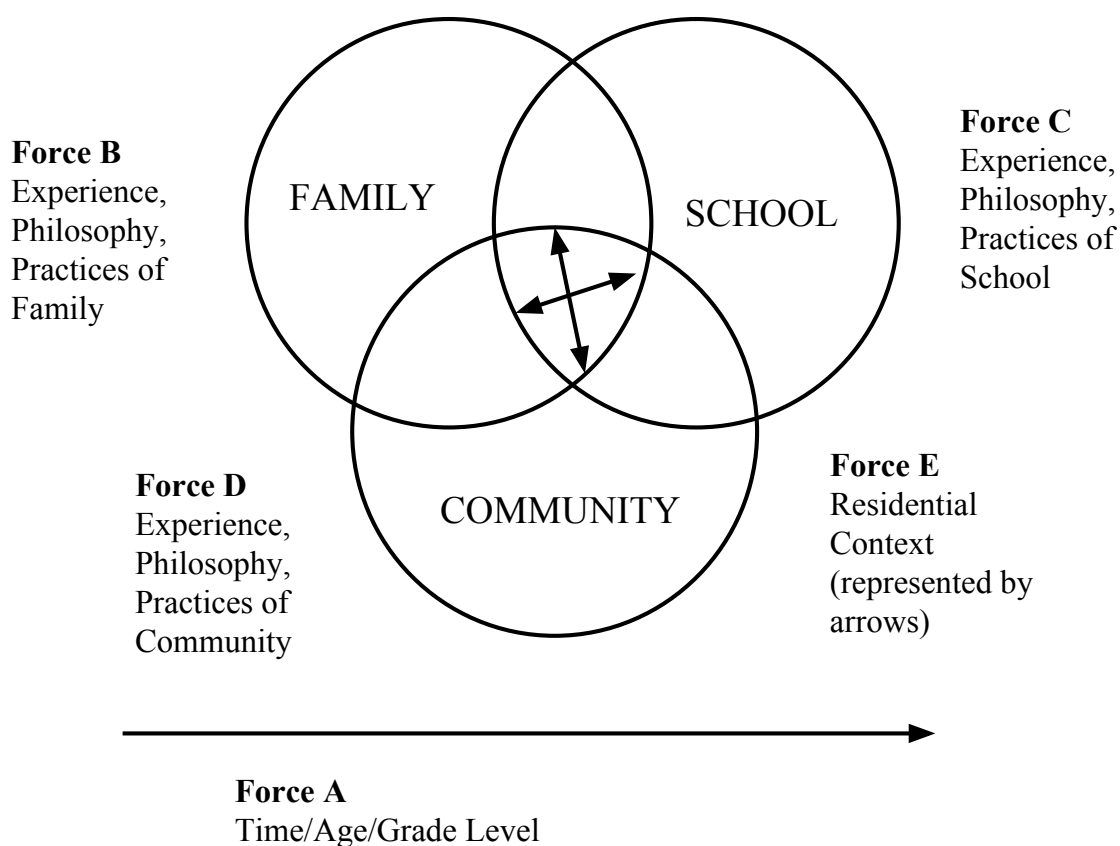
However, for many families, their residential context hindered their ability to be a "school-like family." Aligned with the findings of Miller (2012), families doubled up and in shelter had trouble finding quiet places to do homework although shelter did create some learning opportunities. Extending Miller's (2012) work, I found that housing first families could more easily maintain homework routines, but sometimes felt isolated from the broader community and did not have access to onsite services (see also, Pavlakis, 2014).

Supporting the literature on parenting in public spaces (e.g. Boxill & Beaty, 1990; David et al., 2012; Lindsey, 1998) many HHM parents felt powerless. Some parents believed that their own education hindered their ability to oversee homework and that they needed more scaffolding from schools—a theme similarly reflected in the broader parental involvement literature (e.g. Epstein, 2011; Lareau, 1987). In many instances, these challenges limited "school-like family" practices.

### **Theoretical Implications**

While Epstein's theory and framework was helpful for this study, my findings suggest a couple of theoretical considerations. Referring to the external structure of the overlapping spheres of influence model (Figure 1), and reflecting Barton et al.'s (2004) focus on the broader

context, I suggest that in the context of HHM families, not only are Force A, Force B, Force C, and Force D important, but an additional *Force E*—representing the family’s residential context—may also be needed (Figure 3). Residential context did not impact all aspects of parental involvement in Midtown and sometimes its influence varied based on the children’s age (Force A), yet in many ways it played a role in shaping needs and assets and molding the extent to which FSCPs were fostered. Future research in other urban communities should consider the value of *Force E*.



*Figure 3.* External structure adapted for HHM families. Adapted from *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools (Second Edition)* (p. 32), by J. Epstein, 2011, Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Author has added “Force E.”

Another consideration concerns Figure 2, which illustrates the internal structure of the model. As previously discussed, the Parent (P) and Teacher (T) interactions are about an individual child. However, in the context of HHM families, I suggest that while interactions about a child may be between a teacher and a parent, they are often (and sometimes solely) between a school social worker and a parent or a school social worker, parent, and caseworker. Interviews revealed that school social workers play crucial roles in working with HHM families—a finding mirrored in research (Groton et al., 2013; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Markward & Biros, 2001). As such, the model could be extended to consider the pivotal position of social workers.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

According to Milner (2013), both “outside-and inside-of-school” factors that influence student outcomes are relevant to family and parent involvement (p. 23). Scholarship that considers the intersection of these wide-ranging factors can help propel research on poverty and education forward (Milner, 2013). While this study helps address this need, and is based on rich data, it draws from one community, so additional research is needed to discern transferability. Despite this limitation—and reflecting the broader literature on strengths-based parental involvement and urban schools (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Graue & Oen, 2009)—I suggest that schools need to create spaces to learn from HHM families. By creating these spaces, schools may also foster trust and share power with families—which are important themes in the broader partnership literature (Shields et al., 2013; Warren, 2005). Developing asset-based strategies, such as sharing students’ successes, may be crucial.

Executing Epstein’s (2011) redefinitions may require urban schools and communities to understand the diverse residential contexts. Epstein (2011) suggests that parents should be able

to volunteer in places other than the school building; families in shelter, for instance, could be provided with opportunities to volunteer at on-site shelter-based education programs. Likewise, *workshops*, which should sometimes be held in alternative spaces such as community centers or parent's homes (Carreon et al., 2005), could be hosted in a housing first living room. School actors who are connecting families to resources should be cognizant of needs and assets based on residential context—considering not only shelter families but also those doubled up or in housing first. Schools should also consider relationship building with important figures in student's lives—even if the student is not living with them—and collaborating not only with shelter providers but also with housing first caseworkers, community social workers, and others who know the neighborhoods and individual families well.

McKinney-Vento requires schools to collaborate with school and community stakeholders and communicate with families experiencing homelessness, yet the act is severely underfunded (Tobin & Murphy, 2013; Miller, 2011a). Advocating for increased funding could strengthen the act's power in fostering high-quality interactions between families, schools, and communities. Likewise, schools and districts should ensure that their local parent involvement programs do not operate in isolation from McKinney-Vento related activities. In the face of rising student homelessness, it is more important than ever that urban schools use all the tools at their disposal to forge asset-based partnerships with HHM families and the broader community.

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## Chapter 4:

### **Poverty and Student Homelessness at the Metropolitan Margins: Sensemaking among School and Community Leaders in a Growing Suburb**

*Abstract:*

There is a dearth of education research that explicitly examines suburban poverty and homelessness. The purpose of this study is to learn how school and community leaders in a rapidly growing suburb make sense of rising poverty and homelessness. Garnering organizational insights from the sociological theories of sensemaking and drawing from 42 semi-structured interviews with school and community leaders, as well as observation, district/community data, and artifacts, I suggest that leaders construct racialized accounts of their suburb that they use to rationalize and justify their actions or the actions of others around poverty and homelessness. These narratives shaped educational opportunities for families experiencing poverty and homelessness in unique ways. Recommendations for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

*Keywords: suburban poverty, homelessness, sensemaking.*

## **Objectives and Purpose**

Historically, the suburbs have symbolized the attainment of the American dream (A. Murphy, 2007). In this post World War II imagery, the typical suburban residents are white middle class homeowners (Baldassare, 1986). With race and class-based undertones, suburban living became associated with “morality, simplicity, and purity” in contrast to the “hectic, immoral, unstable, and dangerous” life in the city (A. Murphy, 2007, p. 22). While to some extent the suburbs have always been diverse (Diamond, 2012; Gans, 1967), recently, many have undergone racial and socio-economic changes (Kneebone & Berube, 2012; Mikelbank, 2004).

Increasingly, suburban schools are also facing “city-like” poverty challenges such as student homelessness (Miller & Bourgeois, 2013; Miller, Pavlakis, & Bourgeois, 2013). However, there is a dearth of education research that examines how these challenges unfold in the suburbs. My purpose is to address this research gap and learn how school and community leaders in a growing suburb make sense of rising poverty and homelessness.

## **Conceptualizing Urban and Suburban Spaces**

Instead of simply describing the size and density of a geographic space, the term “urban” is often a euphemism for poverty, crime, and race-related matters. In fact, “urban” is sometimes applied to schools which are located in low-density spaces but happen to have a high proportion of students of color (Milner, 2012). Urban spaces tend to face a variety of challenges but are often also places with many resources. Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of “urban” is necessary in framing suburban areas.

While “suburbia” may conjure up certain images for many Americans, there is not a universal definition of the suburbs. It is however, often discussed in terms of its relationship with and contrasts to urban spaces (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Some scholars define a suburb

as any space outside of the first-named city in a metropolitan area. In contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau tends to classify a number of places in a metropolitan area as principal cities; it defines the suburbs, by default, as areas outside of these cities (Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). The literature on suburban poverty however, complicates and problematizes the geographic and ideological contrasts between urban and suburban spaces.

### **Suburban Poverty and Homelessness**

Today, M. Orfield and Luce (2012) have claimed that in some ways, the suburbs “are now at the cutting edge” of racial and ethnic change in the United States (p. 2). Racially diverse suburbs (suburbs that are between 20-60% non-white) are growing at a faster rate than predominately white suburbs and “diverse suburban neighborhoods now outnumber those in their central cities by more than two to one” (M. Orfield & Luce, 2012, p. 2). However, communities that are racially integrated have difficulty staying as such (Sacks, 2003). For neighborhoods that were greater than 23% non-white in 1980, by 2005 they were more likely to be mostly non-white than to have remained racially integrated (M. Orfield & Luce, 2012). Coupled with racial shifts, the suburbs have increasingly faced socio-economic changes as well. I focus explicitly on these contemporary patterns in suburban poverty. I outline these trends, highlight how they unfold in suburban school districts, and then turn to the challenges they create for both suburban communities and districts.

### **Contemporary Trends**

Paralleling the racial/ethnic changes, research suggests that the suburbs are not immune to poverty. In particular, scholars have highlighted how inner ring suburbs, which are older, higher density, and closer to the city, tend to face a number of poverty-related challenges (Hudnut, 2003; Jargowsky, 1997; Leigh & Lee, 2005; M. Orfield, 2002; Swanstrom, Winter,

Sherraden, & Lake, 2013; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 1999). In 1999, HUD claimed that a number of older suburbs were “experiencing problems once associated only with urban areas—job loss, population decline, crime and disinvestment” (HUD, 1999, p. 1). Work by Hanlon and Vicino (2007) and Vicino (2008) on Baltimore’s inner suburbs from 1980 to 2000 found that a number of the inner suburbs experienced socio-economic decline during this period but that the degree of decline varied between the suburbs. Using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and statistical analysis of the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census, Leigh and Lee (2005) also found that inner ring suburbs were at risk of socio-economic decline and experienced trends similar to those found in central cities such as white flight and increased poverty. Baker (2015) argues, however, that many of these high density “suburban areas” appear virtually indistinguishable from “urban areas” and thus do not signal in themselves a dramatic change or crisis, but rather suggest the importance of clarifying how the suburbs are defined.

Other scholars, however, have looked at broader urban and suburban trends—beyond the inner ring suburbs. According to Swanstrom and colleagues (2004), between 1990 and 2000, the city and suburban per capita income gap remained the same, although regionally, it was still wide and expanding in both the Northeast and Midwest. An analysis of poverty rates in 102 of the most populous metropolitan areas by Berube and Frey (2002) revealed that the poverty rates in central cities declined slightly during the 1990s but increased in the suburbs—which functioned to narrow the poverty gap by half of a percent. Only 11% of high-poverty tracts (30% poverty or more) in the largest 100 metropolitan areas were located in the suburbs in 1980, yet 15% were located in the suburbs in 2000 (Kingsley & Pettit, 2003). The work of Holliday and Dwyer (2009) and A. Murphy (2010) implies that even newer suburbs in many metropolitan areas are affected by poverty.

Recent scholarship suggests that suburban poverty has become more pronounced after the 2008 recession (A. Murphy, 2010; Wilson, 2012; Kneebone & Garr, 2010; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Brookings Institute's Kneebone and Garr (2010) analyzed the geography of poverty in the 95 largest metropolitan areas using the 2000 Census and the 2007 and 2008 American Community Survey (ACS). They found that by 2008, the suburbs had the largest and fastest expanding poor population in the country and that midwestern cities and suburbs experienced the most dramatic poverty rate increases.

To explore how suburban poverty was unfolding across the nation, Kneebone and Berube (2013) coupled poverty and demographic data from the U.S. Census and the ACS with interviews with local leaders and practitioners. By 2010, 54% of the metropolitan poor lived in the suburbs, and nationwide, one out of every three poor Americans lived in suburban spaces. Examining 1,817 suburban jurisdictions in the 100 largest metropolitan areas, the authors found that 988 faced increasing poverty between 2000 and 2008-10. They created a typology of suburban poverty, introduced below, which identified *rapid growth*, *at risk*, *strained*, and *distressed* suburbs based on population growth and change in regional employment.

- **Rapid growth suburbs:** Above average population growth; above average change in regional employment (n= 305/988).
- **Strained suburbs:** Above average population growth; below average change in regional employment (n=162/988).
- **At risk suburbs:** Below average population growth; above average change in regional employment (n=149/988).
- **Distressed suburbs:** Below average population growth; below average change in regional employment (n=162/988).

Examining the causes of suburban poverty, Kneebone and Berube (2013) suggested that it can be partly explained by the in-migration of low-income people seeking better neighborhoods, schools, employment, or housing conditions but also by the downward mobility of residents who were already living in the suburbs. The authors outlined how economic and employment opportunities, population and immigration trends, and housing, help to shape the trends and extent of suburban poverty. These trends often impact school districts first.

### **Poverty and Homelessness in Suburban Districts**

Because poverty rates among school-aged children often rise faster than in the general population (M. Orfield, 2002), schools "tend to inhibit the front lines of efforts to cope with rising suburban poverty, no matter the particular factors driving the trend" (Kneebone & Berube, 2013, p. 66). Since the 1990-91 school year, suburban enrollments have increased in nearly every metropolitan area (Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012). However, enrollment size (due in part to school district structure and the degree of fragmentation) and rate of growth varies greatly between suburbs (Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012). Because of rising suburban school enrollments from 1999 to 2006, Frankenberg and G. Orfield (2012) found that the increase in poor students in suburban schools exceeded the increase in city schools in many metropolitan areas. Kneebone and Berube (2013) found that in the 100 largest metropolitan areas, by the 2009-10 school year, there were 2.9 million more suburban students enrolled in the free and reduced price lunch program than there were in the cities. City schools, however, still maintained a greater concentration of students on free and reduced price lunch (65% versus only 39%) but by the late 2000, the discrepancy between the city and suburbs was declining (Kneebone & Berube, 2013).

Because poverty is a key risk factor homelessness, rising poverty in schools can also be accompanied by increases in homelessness (Miller, 2011a, 2013). Across the country, there are over a million students who have been identified as homeless—most of these students are also living in poverty. Unfortunately, the number is increasing; this is a critical issue for schools and districts because on average, students experiencing homelessness tend to face high rates of social isolation, school mobility, behavioral problems, and grade retention (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Buckner, 2008; Masten et al., 1997; Masten, Herbers, Desjardins, Cutuli, McCormick, Spaienza, Long & Zelazo, 2012; Miller, 2011a; J. Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Obradovic et al., 2009; Rafferty et al., 2004; Zima, Wells & Freeman, 1994; Zima & Forness, 1997).

By providing a range of supports to students experiencing homelessness, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento) aims to reduce barriers to school success (McKinney-Vento, 2001). The Act suffers from implementation inconsistencies but still serves as a crucial tool to schools nationwide (Miller, 2011b; J. Murphy & Tobin, 2011). In conjunction with McKinney-Vento, scholars suggest the importance of overcoming biases and stereotypes, creating a welcoming school culture, and connecting families to community resources through meaningful cross-sector action (Grothaus, Lorelle, Anderson, & Knight, 2011; Groton, Teasley & Canfield, 2013; Miller, 2013; J. Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Shields & Warke, 2010; Stronge & Hudson, 1999). Compared to the suburbs, cities often confront substantially larger proportions of students experiencing homelessness. Much of the education scholarship on homelessness is also situated in urban areas (e.g. Grothaus et al., 2011; Hallett, 2012; Miller, 2011c; Pavlakis, 2013). Communities that are traditionally defined as “suburban” are often overlooked—yet they may face distinct challenges in attempting to respond.

### **Challenges for Suburban Communities and Districts**

Compared to central cities, suburban areas may be at an advantage when it comes to addressing poverty because they may have a higher tax base or a lower concentration of low-income families. Yet, not all suburban communities are this fortunate and in many other ways the suburbs may face unique obstacles. In fact, the cities tend to have better access to job opportunities, services, and transportation (Holliday & Dwyer, 2009; Hudnut, 2003; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; A. Murphy, 2010). While not all suburban areas face the same challenges, some may be “caught off guard” (Kneebone & Berube, 2013, p. 57) and may lack the capacity to effectively respond to rising poverty (M. Orfield, 2002). Suburban areas may also focus more on the needs and wants of the affluent, serving to marginalize the poor and exacerbate stratification (Holliday & Dwyer, 2009). Not all suburban areas face the same challenges because suburban communities are not all the same—some are car dependent while others have strong public transportation systems, some are relatively wealthy with rising populations while others have a declining tax base. Yet, many suburbs face access and transportation barriers (Boeri, Tyndall & Woodall, 2011; Francis et al., 2009; Hess, 2005; Kneebone & Berube, 2013) difficulty competing for resources (Allard & Roth, 2010; Gaines & Kaimer, 1994; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; A. Murphy, 2010; Reckhow & Weir, 2010; Tyre & Phillips, 2007), a sheer lack of anti-poverty organizations (Allard, 2004; A. Murphy & Wallace, 2010), and political and policy obstacles (Hudnut, 2003; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; A. Murphy, 2010), which can obstruct an effective response to poverty.

There is a small body of literature on racial and socioeconomic suburban school segregation (e.g. Reardon & Yun, 2001; Reardon, Yun & Chmielewski, 2012; Wells et al., 2009; Wells et al., 2012), suburban school district responses to racial changes (e.g. Evans, 2007; Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Welton, Diem & Holme, 2013), and the suburban schooling

experiences of families of color (e.g. Diamond, 2006; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Notably, one large study carried out by the UCLA Civil Rights Project (<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>) under Gary Orfield explores how school districts in the suburbs respond to demographically changing student populations. While this project emphasizes issues of race, socio-economic changes are intrinsically intertwined. Part of the UCLA study, Holme, Diem and Welton (2014) for instance, examined how a suburban district responded to changing demographics and found that there was a heavy focus on technical reforms in curriculum and instruction. These initiatives were thwarted by the normative and political dynamics which were left largely unchallenged by the district—serving to hinder equity for low-income students and students of color. Frankenberg and G. Orfield (2012) suggest that how suburban school districts respond to racial changes are likely to vary based on a number of political, institutional, and policy factors. Social policies contribute, for example, to how the metropolitan area develops and shapes the options families have when considering where to reside. At the same time, decisions schools make, such as around district boundary lines, serve to impact perceptions of community quality (Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012). Leadership challenges may occur as, “almost all educational administrators are former teachers; they are not typically trained in demography, housing, race relations, or the dynamics of neighborhood change” (G. Orfield, 2012, p. 219). As schools are only a piece of much broader metropolitan demographic change, many suburban districts do not have the capacity to coherently respond (Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012).

While this strand of research makes important progress in understanding demographic change, segregation, and experiences in suburban districts, there is little to no education research that considers student and family homelessness in the suburbs. Coupled with the multi-faceted factors attributed to the rise of suburban poverty, recent federal rehousing policies, such as the

Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 (HEARTH), may also be shifting the geography of family homelessness. The HEARTH Act—designed to help families maintain or transition into independent living arrangements—emphasizes the use of scatter-site housing over congregate shelters. Thus, rather than concentrating families in a small number of shelters, with policies such as the HEARTH Act, families may now be more likely to be dispersed over larger geographic areas, including the suburbs (Miller & Bourgeois, 2013).

Examining one metropolitan area using geospatial analysis, Miller and Bourgeois (2013) suggested that residential instability was spreading beyond the city and speculated that suburban districts may lack the needed infrastructure that are more common—although not ubiquitous—in large urban districts throughout the country. For instance, some urban areas have programs specifically dedicated to overseeing implementation of McKinney-Vento—programs which are often partially funded by McKinney-Vento subgrants that most suburban districts go completely without. Due to the relatively new nature of poverty and homelessness increases, suburban districts may also have less experience developing practices and building capacity. Miller and Bourgeois (2013) note that these infrastructure problems are likely to be coupled with community-level challenges to accessing education-related resources (such as fewer community centers and larger distances between services). The authors suggest that “perhaps more than ever...student homelessness is not just a ‘big city’ issue” (Miller & Bourgeois, 2013, p.242) but highlight that more work is needed. This research gap however, remains largely unexplored.

I address this research gap by examining suburban school and community leaders’ perspectives around poverty and homelessness. As such, I build upon the work of the UCLA Civil Rights Project and Miller and Bourgeois (2013) while also extending the suburban poverty literature (e.g. Kneebone and Berube (2013); A. Murphy (2010)). I ask, “In a rapidly growing

suburb, how do school and community leaders make sense of rising poverty and homelessness?” Because the school and community often share leadership pertaining to family poverty and homelessness (Miller, 2011b)—and school social workers can often play key connecting roles (Groton et al., 2013)—I use the term “school leaders” rather than “administrators.” To address my research question, I draw organizational insights from theories of sensemaking—particularly the work of Karl Weick and colleagues (1995; 2005).

### Theoretical Framework

With diverse historical roots (e.g. Blumer, 1969; Giddens, 1976; Mead, 1934; Weber, 1947), sensemaking refers to the ways in which people or groups apply meaning to their experiences (Weick, 1995). Faced with change or crisis (Evans, 2007), people or groups undergo experiences that can be interpreted in many different ways (Weick, 1995). They make sense of unexpected events by situating new information within their worldviews, or preexisting cognitive frameworks (Coburn, 2005; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989). As Figure 1 illustrates, the sensemaking process occurs when people or groups take a cue from their environment and then make a connection to their framework. According to Weick (1995), “the *feeling* of order, clarity, and rationality is an important goal of sensemaking” (p. 29). Yet, at the same time that people react to their environments, they also shape their environments. Weick (1995) outlined seven properties of sensemaking which are introduced below.

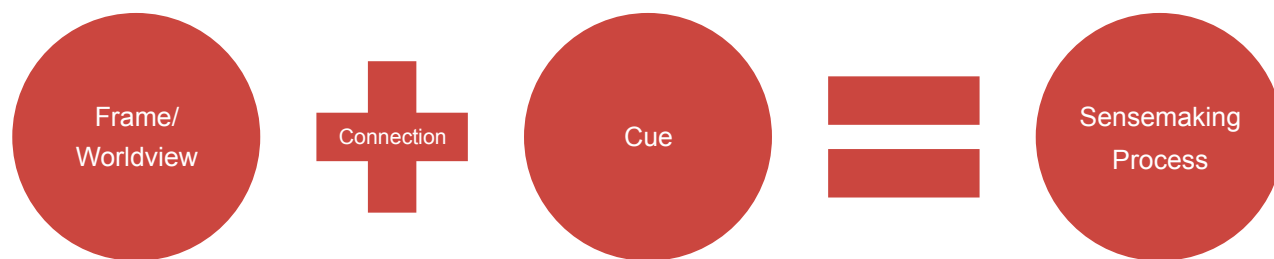
- **Identity:** “When people face an unsettling difference, that difference will often translate into questions such as who are we, what are we doing, what matters, and why does it matter?” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 416).
- **Retrospective:** People tend to make sense of events *after* they occur. Sensemaking on one event shapes future sensemaking (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weick, 1995).

- **Enactment:** Actors are part of the environment (not just passive). They create their surroundings and their actions can restrict future actions (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weick, 1995).
- **Social:** Sensemaking is based on interactions with others (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weick, 1995).
- **Extracted Cues:** The cues actors take from their environment are often those that are compatible with their previous experiences (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weick, 1995).
- **Plausibility:** Sensemaking focuses on what is plausible rather than what is accurate (Weick, 1995).

For Weick (1995), self-fulfilling prophecies are also a central act in sensemaking. In essence, people's expectations regarding what *may* happen drive what they end up seeing, serving to confirm their expectations. To illustrate, Weick (1995) shares Henshel's (1987) example of a judge who uses the defendants' home life as a cue in deciding the decisions of juvenile delinquency cases. The judge decides to send people from broken homes to prison and those from intact homes for probation. Those in prison turn to more serious crimes when they are released because they have more trouble finding work. Over time, crime statistics now suggest that broken homes correlates with repeated crime, which then justifies judges using home conditions to make decisions on future crime cases. As Weick (1995) highlights, "they see things of their own making. They see what they expect." (p. 148).

According to Thayer (1988), "the leader is a sensegiver" (p. 254) because "it is the leaders' stories that *mediate* for all those who would follow, an alternative way of being, doing, knowing, having, or saying in the world" (p. 260). Given the importance of leadership to sensemaking, it is not surprising that it has been applied to educational leadership—often in the

context of policy implementation (e.g. Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Coburn, 2001). Evans' work (2007), however, examined how school leaders made sense of racial changes in three suburban high schools and found that their sensemaking related to their racial and role identities as well as the local context and ideology of their schools. To my knowledge, sensemaking has not been applied to matters of poverty and homelessness. Building off of the extant literature, and validating the importance of cross-sector action in addressing poverty and homelessness (Miller, 2011b), I examine both school and community leaders' sensemaking. As such, I recognize that leaders are often embedded in organizations but also that these sensemakers and sensegivers are working and living in the same community—in this case, Acreville, a pseudonym for a Midwest suburb.



*Figure 1.* The sensemaking process.

### Context, Methods, and Data Sources

Acreville, a suburb of a medium-sized city, was an appropriate site for my case study for several reasons. First, the Acreville school district (ASD) has experienced rising poverty and homelessness. Since the 2001-02 school year, the percentage of students in poverty has more than doubled, and between 2005-06 and 2013-14, the number of homeless students increased by 308%. The increase in homelessness was not evenly distributed throughout the district; Flower Hill (a pseudonym) for instance, experienced a 700% change in homelessness.

Second, while much of the research on suburban poverty focuses on the inner-ring suburbs (most of which are *distressed* or *at risk* in Kneebone and Berube's (2013) typology), Acreville is a rapidly growing community—a type of suburban space less well examined. According to Kneebone and Berube (2013), between 2000 and 2010, *rapid growth suburbs* experienced a 43% growth in population and were located in regions that experienced metropolitan employment gains of 6%. Over this same time period, Acreville's population increased by nearly 50% and its metropolitan area experienced an increase in employment of 6.9% (compared to an average of -1.3%). Even in the last couple of years, Acreville remains one of the fastest growing communities in the state.

Lastly, while ASD has experienced rising poverty and homelessness, the community still conforms to *popular conceptions* of the suburbs. For instance, its mean family income far exceeds the state's average—an indicator of relative affluence. It is also car dependent; 93% of workers commute by automobile and it has a “walk score” of 30, which designates it as a location requiring a vehicle ([www.walkscore.com](http://www.walkscore.com)). Furthermore, 93% of its housing was built after 1950, reflecting its post-WWII growth. Although Acreville is undergoing racial/ethnic changes, it still remains majority white (85%). Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of blacks

increased 100% and the percentage of Latino residents (across race) increased nearly 60%. As such, Acreville is an instrumental case in that it is undergoing changes that are similar to many other rapidly growing suburbs throughout the United States.

### **Data Collection**

This study draws from wide-ranging data including 42 semi-structured interviews with community and school leaders, analysis of school board meeting minutes, observation of school board meetings, artifact collection, and longitudinal school district data on poverty, homelessness, and mobility.

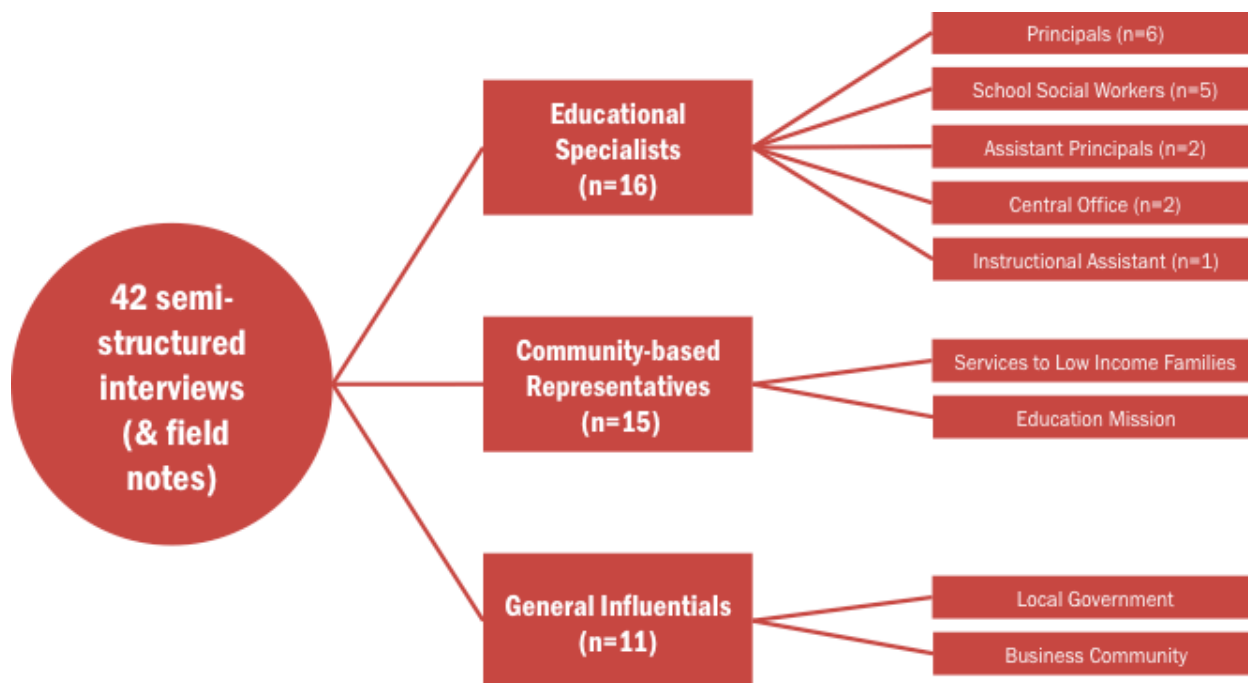
#### **Interviews.**

Between January and October of 2014, I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews in person—each one lasting about an hour. To guide my purposeful selection, I drew insights from an 11-city study of educational reform and civic capacity, which identified *educational specialists, community-based representatives, and general influentials* (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999; Portz, Stein, & Jones, 1999; see also Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012). Across all three categories, I coupled expert sampling (Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012) with snowball sampling to identify “hidden” actors (Bryman, 2004). Expert sampling in a majority white community led to a sample of participants that were predominately white, and by virtue of their professional roles, often in positions of relative power in the community.

For the purposes of my study (see Figure 3), educational specialists (n=16) were my school leaders. I invited all of the district’s principals as well as school social workers—who were the main point of contact for McKinney-Vento related duties—interviewing 55% of all principals and over 38% of school social workers. Using snowball sampling, I also interviewed central office actors (n=2) as well as assistant principals (n=2) and instructional assistants (n=1).

Community-based representatives (n=15) were leaders who either provided services to low-income families or worked for an organization that had an education mission. I identified organizations (such as social service, advocacy, neighborhood, or religious groups) through the Acreville Chamber of Commerce Community Guide and then isolated the key leaders through the organizations' websites. Snowball sampling led to interviews with additional providers. Of all the community-based representatives invited to interview, 79% opted to participate.

General influentials (n=11) were central decision makers in the community—serving key roles in business or local government. I identified general influentials through the town website, Chamber of Commerce Community guide, as well as snowball sampling techniques. Of all the general influentials I invited to an interview, 58% opted to participate.



*Figure 2.* Semi-structured interviews. The terms “educational specialists”, “community-based representatives”, and “general influentials” adapted from, *The color of school reform: Race, politics, and the challenge of urban education*, by J.R. Henig, R.C. Hula, M. Orr and D.S. Pedescleaux, 1999, Princeton University Press.

Borrowing from Frankenberg and G. Orfield (2012), I used separate semi-structured interview protocols with some overlapping questions between the three groups, and drawing from ethnography, I wrote field notes about the interviewees' non-verbal cues (Bryman, 2004). Table 1 highlights sample questions from the semi-structured protocols. In order to validate the interview protocols, I piloted each one with university colleagues who were well versed in the poverty and homelessness literature. The educational specialist protocol was piloted with an assistant principal of a suburban school in a district that was similar to ASD.

Table 1

*Sample Protocol Questions*

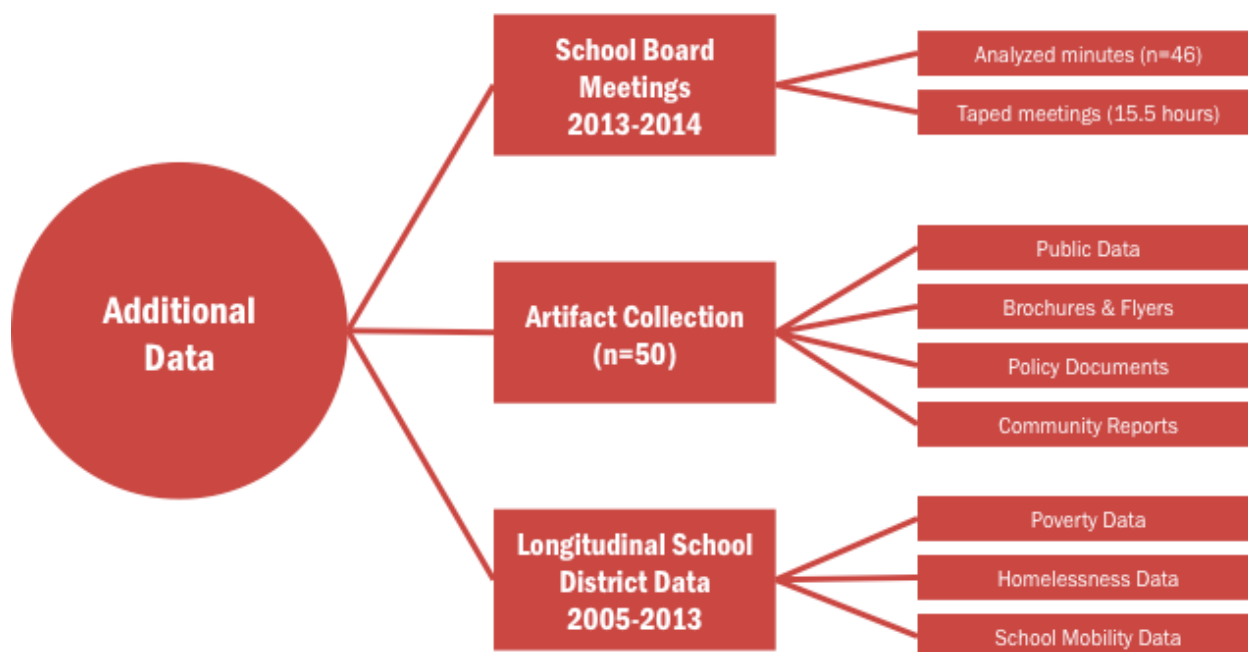
| <b>Educational Specialists</b>                                                                                                                                                | <b>Community-based<br/>Representatives</b>                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>General Influentials</b>                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>In what ways is Acreville a great place to raise kids and send them to school?</p> <p>In what ways might this community be a challenge for some families and children?</p> | <p>To what extent do you think the community is aware of poverty and homelessness?</p> <p>Since you have been here, can you give me specific examples of how the community has changed over time and how it has stayed the same?</p> | <p>In recent years, Acreville has experienced heightened student poverty and homelessness. What do you think accounts for or has contributed to these changes?</p> |

Participants choose the date, time, and location for the voluntary interview, selected their own pseudonym, and had control of the audio recorder. All proper nouns in the study are pseudonyms and some details were changed in order to protect the identity of individuals, the district, or the broader community. Throughout the entire study, I was aware of how my research impacted the participants and community (Sieber, 1998).

I continued to invite and interview leaders until I reached saturation within my three groups: educational specialists, community-based representatives, and general influentials. I reached saturation when I was no longer learning new information. In this sense, each of the 42 interviews served as a “nested case”—I used each one to help me predict what I may learn in the next interview and to gain a sense of when I reached saturation (Small, 2009).

#### **Additional data collection.**

I also gathered supplemental data (see Figure 4) that furthered and complemented my understandings.



*Figure 3.* Additional data collection.

Meetings are times when “ambiguity tends to collect” and are thus important to sensemaking (Weick, 1995, p. 187). Because school board meetings are spaces where school and community leaders interact and can collectively make sense of change (see Coburn (2001) on teachers’ professional communities and collective sensemaking), I also analyzed 46 of the 2013-14 school board meeting minutes and based on my analysis then observed 15.5 hours of taped school board meeting videos (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Observed School Board Meetings*

| <b>Date</b> | <b>Meeting Type<br/>(Committee names have been changed slightly)</b> |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9/4/13      | Community Involvement Committee                                      |
| 9/9/13      | ASD School Board Meeting                                             |
| 9/16/13     | Operations Committee                                                 |
| 9/23/13     | ASD School Board Meeting                                             |
| 9/30/13     | Annual ASD District Meeting                                          |
| 10/7/13     | Development Committee                                                |
| 10/14/13    | ASD School Board Meeting                                             |
| 11/11/13    | ASD School Board Meeting                                             |
| 11/12/13    | Electors Meeting                                                     |
| 2/18/14     | Community Involvement Committee                                      |
| 5/7/14      | Community Involvement Committee                                      |
| 5/19/14     | Operations Committee                                                 |

Additionally, I collected over 50 Acreville artifacts including public data, brochures and flyers, policy documents, and community reports. Finally, I also gathered longitudinal school district data on poverty, homelessness, and mobility from ASD. Taken together, my diverse and in-depth data collection allowed me to triangulate my sources, which is not only an important component of case study research but it also helps to ensure accuracy (Cresswell, 2007).

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo 10, a qualitative software program. I began with inductive data analysis, engaging in an open coding process in order to highlight emergent themes from the participants' responses. This process required me to conduct a slow, line-by-line reading of each transcript and key artifact, where I paid attention to "processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 275). I then used axial coding to identify relationships between themes and gather the codes into groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, I examined how the themes related to sensemaking. However, to avoid allowing my theoretical framework to restrict my analysis, this was not a tightly deductive process. This process is illustrated in Figure 4.

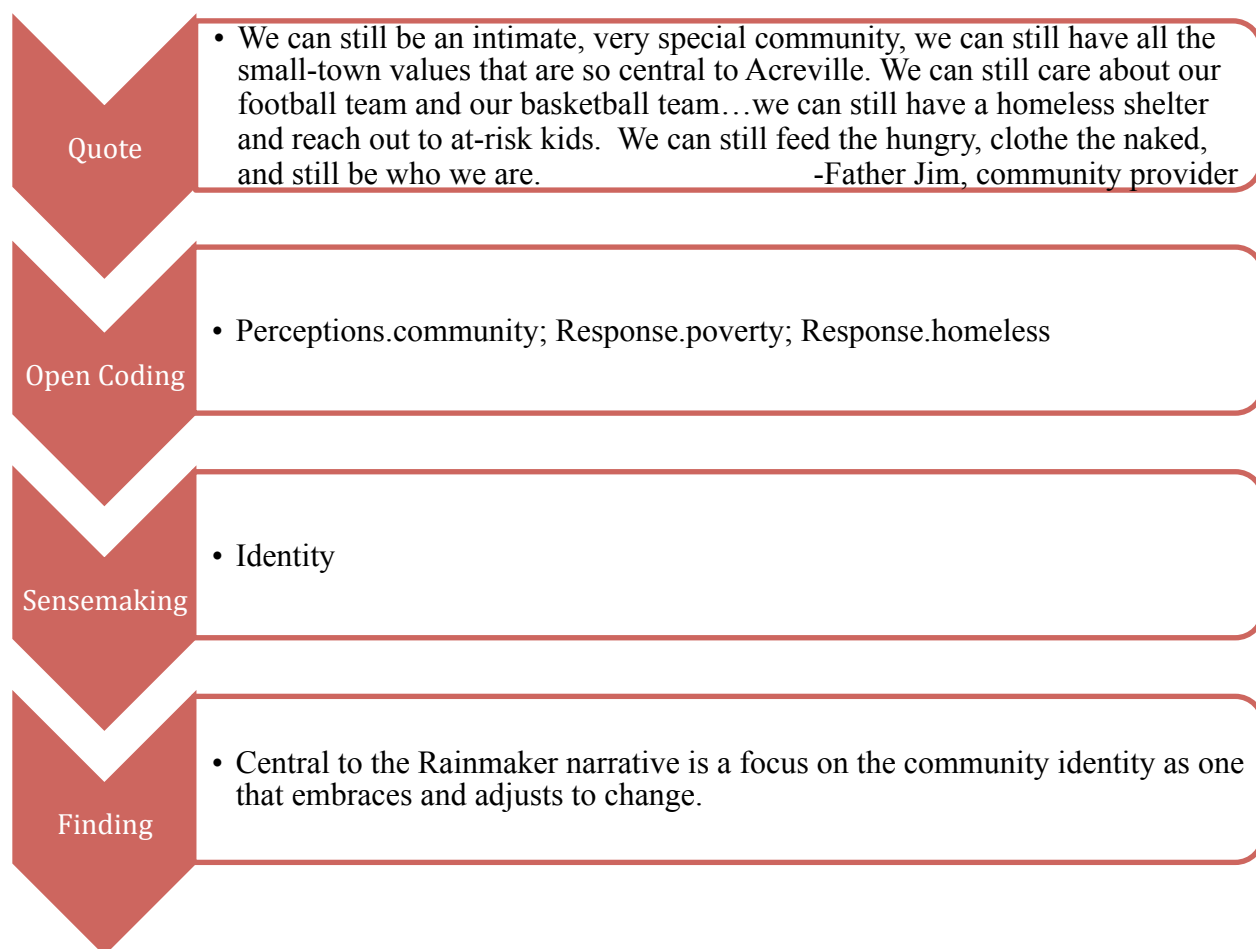


Figure 4. Data analysis process.

## Results

I identified the Magnet, Rainmaker, Savior, and Old Boys Club narratives. These four narratives reflect the ways in which people in Acreville make sense of rising poverty and homelessness. Often times, leaders used these narratives to rationalize and justify their actions or the actions of others around matters of poverty and homelessness. Because people are sometimes guided by more than one narrative at different points in time, I did not classify interview participants as belonging to one and only one narrative group. Taken together, however, the narratives reflect ideologies around community identity, poverty, and race. They

also play an important role in policy and mold the educational opportunities of families and students experiencing poverty and homelessness in unique ways. I discuss each of the four narratives in turn.

### **The Magnet Narrative**

Twenty out of 42 interview participants discussed the Magnet narrative—either personally embodying it or recognizing that this was a way that others in the community made sense of change. Of the 20 leaders, eight were community representatives, six were school employees and six were general influentials. In this narrative, Acreville’s community services, affordable rental housing, and good schools served as a “magnet” to draw poor families into town. With racial undertones, the Magnet narrative was about ensuring that only “responsible” people resided and thrived in Acreville. Rather than Acreville needing to adjust services to better serve families, families had to conform to Acreville’s “rules.”

In fact, rumor has it that scrupulous landlords plastered advertisements about Acreville in nearby high poverty, inner-city neighborhoods. These billboards served to advertise how Acreville was the perfect place to live. Nearly a quarter of all leaders discussed these billboards and they were often associated with increases in racial diversity, poverty, crime, and gangs. However, a couple of interview participants revealed that there is no evidence this ever happened and that it is most likely town folklore. Housing data, artifacts, and interviews with the county housing authority revealed that there was more migration from the local county to the inner city county than the other way around. And of the over 450 families on the county Section 8 wait list (otherwise known as the Housing Choice Voucher Program which allows low income families and individuals to find affordable housing on the private market), 87% already lived in the local area code, suggesting that families were not coming to Acreville from outside the area

for the affordable housing. The myth of the billboards persisted however, and played important roles in shaping how occupants in public housing were perceived and in molding perspectives on how the town should conduct policy matters going forward.

**Crime, gangs, and safety.**

Fears over crime, gangs, and safety loomed large in the Magnet narrative and were connected to the rise in poverty and racial diversity. A police officer, Jessie, highlights these fears and reflects his uncertainty over local crime data—he recognizes that crime has not risen disproportionately but he does not think people’s property is as safe as it was in the past.

Yeah, it is probably an uptick...I have been here my whole life...I don’t think people’s property is as safe. I think it’s still the same with [what] we call property crimes, theft, vandalism. I don’t think that has gone up disproportionately. It has risen in total number, in aggregate number, but its proportionate to our population growth. But people certainly, it’s definitely a concern of theirs.

He also exemplifies common race-based semantics in the Magnet narrative; he declares that diversity is a positive change for Acreville while simultaneously hinting that it is not—by for instance, suggesting that incoming residents may have “slightly different morals.”

But they [government/community] have been very accepting of people of different colors, people with different socioeconomic backgrounds, maybe people with slightly different morals, different subcultures...the influx of these folks, in my personal opinion [and] I think that most people would agree, if you talked to them about it, it’s for the better.

Concerns crime and safety also extend to the school district. Marie, a school leader, suggests:

We've started to experience the same things that inner cities experience and this is not related to any one particular group or culture but...we've had more students with drug issues, we've had more crime, break-ins...As we grow, we also take on some of those same characteristics of a more urban community so I think the safety part has changed.

Likewise, Michael, a community provider highlights:

But what happened, they [school district] didn't expect, is that a lot of these kids brought their whole customs with them. If they didn't want to learn, or if they ever thought not to learn, or if they are members of a gang, they didn't leave that behind.

Accompanying this preoccupation with crime and safety, Acreville created a task force to explore the "gang issue" in town. While investigations were ongoing during fieldwork, early findings suggest the presence of cliques of youth but not territory-based activity (which is often a central feature of gangs in cities). Despite this fundamental finding, many leaders continued to be concerned about the gang presence.

### **Policy, programs, and practices.**

Beyond the gang task force, in many other instances, the Magnet narrative infiltrates local policy, programs, and practices—often in ways that created barriers for families experiencing poverty and homelessness. For instance, certain students and families are routinely excluded from the town library. Because students' library cards are linked to their parents, when anyone in the family owes the library over twenty dollars, no one in the family is allowed to check out books or use the internet. This creates substantial obstacles for families in poverty and homelessness who may particularly rely on the library to search for jobs or complete homework assignments for school. Tiki, a librarian, notes that urban areas often provide limited use cards but that Acreville has different rules to which families need to conform. In order for students to

receive library cards, parents' cards must be in good standing. Tiki has less trouble settling the accounts of middle class families who can provide the money upfront, and she works on a case-by-case basis with other families to devise a payment plan "if they are willing to accept the blame" and do not "have a whole story to go with it." Some parents who owe money are not contacted, however, and the student is simply denied a card. She explains:

I often talk to teachers...I'll say like, this child, and this child there's some issues. And they'll be like, that one don't even try...they're in and out of foster care, you know like, there are a lot of other issues at play there and we're just glad that they make it to school once in a while—you know, [that] sort of thing.

Tiki works with teachers to decide which students should not be given a library card simply because their home situation suggests it would be too hard to work with the parent. In these cases, students are denied vital access to educational resources because of their family situation.

The Magnet narrative was also strikingly evident in discussions of housing policy and homelessness. Anne, a school employee discussed how:

There's a strip in Acreville where there are like 12 units and the owner wants to turn that over to make Section 8 housing. So its like, 'well, have you talked to anybody...where will those kids be going to school?...many have special needs, may [be] transient type kids maybe. Have you talked to anybody about how this is going to impact the schools? And do we want Section 8 housing? Do we need more of that here in town?

According to some leaders, the Magnet narrative had adverse impacts on students who were experiencing homelessness. Juno, a school social worker, discusses how the "police call rule" where police officers worked with landlords to oversee who entered and stayed in low income housing, made students and families afraid to call the cops in domestic situations, led to evictions

even for families who were paying rent, and then increased the length of homelessness for families because they then could not find affordable housing in town because they had an eviction on their record.

### **The Rainmaker Narrative**

The Rainmaker narrative, discussed by 14 leaders, the majority of whom were in the schools (n=6), suggests a very different picture of Acreville. The term “rainmaker” is applied here to highlight the narrative’s emphasis on *getting things done* around poverty and homelessness, rather than to suggest an association with financial resources. In this narrative, racial diversity is an asset, and Acreville is a growing community that needs to change services to better meet the needs of families. Extensive cross-sector collaboration is crucial—and school leaders are often cited as trailblazers in this regard. Meaningful cross sector action led to a number of programs and practices which were unique for the suburbs, including the community school initiative, and a one-stop-shop for services.

#### **Identity and leadership.**

As illustrated in Figure 4, reshaping, realigning, and reconfirming the identity of Acreville is central to the Rainmaker narrative. There is also an emphasis on guiding how the rest of the community understands and responds to poverty and community change. For instance, Jack, a school leader explained:

This used to be kind of more a farmer town, wasn’t necessarily called a suburb; it was outside. Now it’s a suburb of a bigger city and those changing demographics have meant some of the old school thought folks that have lived here their entire lives say, “well, that’s not the way it used to be here.” So we do fight some of that mentality sometimes.

And you know, we have to try to counsel those kinds of families away from that sort of thought pattern...

A number of policies, programs, and practices in the district and community also reflect the emphasis on community identity.

### **Policy, programs, and practices.**

Many of the actions of the Acreville school district best reflect the Rainmaker narrative. For instance, ASD decided to revamp their mission statement to better align with the changing community. Elena, a school social worker discusses this collaborative process:

...everybody coming in and having these huge conversations about how we want our district to look like and what we want our district to be like. And what we want in our district to support our families and students, and how it's going to be like in 10-15 years.

The mission statement rewrite was also an opportunity for the district to guide the broader community in their interpretation of events. As Robert from the central office explains, "if everybody knows everything and is pointed in the right direction, it can be really powerful."

Foundational to the Rainmaker narrative is the community schools initiative (raised by 20 interview participants) and the one-stop-shop for services (discussed by 32 interview participants). These programs serve as central pillars of Acreville's response to poverty and homelessness. In the community schools initiative, a partnership was forged between a community-based organization and the school district in an attempt to address the wide varying needs of children and families such as mental health and English language literacy. Preliminary outcome data from the initiative suggest early successes, such as 1.3 times more growth on standardized tests for students who participated in their tutoring program compared to their peers. As Samantha, a general influential, explains:

a lot of different organizations are working together because they recognize that to serve people in poverty or to serve other various groups, you need to bring as many resources together...and I think the different groups are being more proactive about educating the decision makers in the community as a whole...not just to let them know that this is what's happening, but to really respond and serve the people that need to be served.

Reflecting the Rainmaker narrative, the community schools initiative not only adjusted services to meet the needs of families but also created opportunities for leaders to educate others in the community about poverty and community change.

Similarly, the one-stop-shop for social services is an umbrella organization for anti-poverty groups that are all housed on-site and accessibly located in town. Poverty and homelessness are central in their marketing materials and they work closely with the school district to connect students and families to food, clothing, and housing assistance. Some services, such as the mattresses program, which distributes free beds to low-income children, began after school social workers told them that they had students sleeping on hard floors who were unable to concentrate in school.

### **The Savior Narrative**

While the Magnet and Rainmaker narratives were the most widely mentioned, the Saviors also emerged from the data. This narrative was raised by 7 leaders and most often discussed by school actors about some of the community leaders. In the Savior narrative, there is recognition of community change and a desire to help, but the well-intentioned responses are not always in the best interest of those in need. Sometimes other leaders viewed the actions of those guided by the Savior narrative to be as self-serving, counterproductive, or stigmatizing.

### **Policy, programs, and practices.**

The Savior narrative was evident in policy and programmatic responses. For instance, school leaders discussed how the Savivors wished to ensure that students in poverty received holiday gifts but they wanted to deliver the presents themselves and bring their own children with them (who attend school with the students in poverty) in order to teach their children a lesson. Many times school leaders felt it necessary to protect families experiencing poverty and homelessness from these types of stigmatizing events.

While the district was often at the forefront of positive change, some ASD policies also created barriers for students and families. Faye, a school social worker, discusses how the district wanted the social workers to meet families experiencing homelessness at the gas pump in order to reimburse them for transporting their children to school by car. According to Faye, the district pushed this policy change because central office thought it would be a good opportunity for social workers to connect with families. Yet, not only was this policy time consuming for families and social workers, it was also stigmatizing for families. As Faye explains:

because as social workers, we're pretty well known in the communities and you know, when we're showing up at the gas station to meet three or four of our families, now all of a sudden those families know, "yeah they're a homeless family too because Ms. Faye is meeting us here."

Faye suggests there was an undercurrent of fear that if social workers were not present, families would use the money for food—a position she believed social workers disregarded.

it's kind of like well, if they decide to use it for bananas and use their own money for gas and they're still getting their kids to school, okay. I mean, that was the, from a social worker kind of aspect we're just like, "so what?" If they're getting their kids to school

and the kid happens to get some milk that week, why are we going to make such a big deal out of that?

To reduce stigma, the following year, the district changed its policy, providing families with a voucher that could be handed in at the gasoline station.

Outside of the school district, the Savior narrative was also evident in services for housing assistance. Callie, a community provider, epitomizes the Savior narrative:

Now we've had families that have come in and say they want to change, but they are really looking at us to find them housing and kind of meet their needs and then their interests. They are really not interested in change because one of our philosophies is that true lasting change comes from a relationship with God.

Unlike the Magnets narrative, the Savior narrative was not about keeping people out of Acreville; instead there is a well-intentioned and active desire to help and respond to poverty. However, the actions associated with this narrative could pose substantial obstacles to families and students living in poverty and homelessness; for instance, families may need housing assistance but may not feel comfortable with the religious stipulations.

### **The Old Boys Club Narrative**

Lastly, 10 leaders discussed the Old Boys Club narrative, which was often associated with the local government. In this narrative, there is a lack of awareness, or more importantly, a lack of *willingness to be aware* of the changes in poverty and homelessness. Acreville, in this imagery, is still viewed as a middle-class community with little to no evidence of poverty and homelessness; this perception of Acreville was used to justify *inaction* around related matters. For some leaders, the Old Boys Club narrative was problematic precisely because it led to a lack of policy, programmatic, and practice-related responses.

For instance, Jay a general influential, explained how the government does not “have a political future” in attending to poverty and homelessness. As such, they “wouldn’t believe the fact that the school district told them there were 300 homeless families. They said, ‘where are they? We don’t see them!’...again, they prefer to not see what’s there.” Similarly, Debbie, a community representative argued that the government had a “myopic” stance “despite many efforts by community groups and others to encourage them to look a little bit more globally at what’s going on in their community.”

In an interview with Alec, a general influential, the Old Boys Club narrative is well illustrated. I asked Alec why he thought the school district numbers on poverty and homelessness were on the rise:

“It’s hard to know...the Mayor, this was his initiative to find out...what kind of gang activity we are having...so I think—I am not—I am not correlating poverty to gangs but what I am saying is I don’t think we know exactly what is happening in the community and we have recognized that...so what we are finding is that there is not a lot of data and I think that is how I am connecting it to poverty is I don’t know how much data is being collected as far as poverty goes so we can understand what we have going on...and then can react to it.”

Alec’s response suggests there is not enough data to react to potential poverty increases—despite the existence of rising district numbers. He suggests that it would be premature to respond until the data is better understood. The Old Boys Club however, was not in isolation; often it interacted with the Magnet, Rainmaker, and Savior narratives—creating ideological tensions.

### **Narrative Intersections in Policy**

On a number of occasions, the four narratives—the Magnet, Rainmaker, Savior, and Old Boys Club narratives—intersected in school/community policy, programs, and practices. How these intersections played out served to shape educational and wellbeing opportunities for students and families experiencing poverty and homelessness. I present three key examples of these narrative intersections—changes to the school district’s transportation policy, the school and businesses’ Gold Medal Lunch, and the Acreville recycling permits. In each case, the outcome served to improve conditions for families and students experiencing poverty and homelessness but not always with the same etiology.

One policy issue that electors in ASD raised to the school board was the distance at which students were eligible for a school bus. This event reflected the interactions between the Old Boys Club, Magnet, and Rainmaker narratives. Sarah, a community provider, argues:

I had met a family that lived just outside the boundary and so their children had to walk...it was a neighborhood of low income housing...In my neighborhood, you know, kids have cars, and the parents have extra cars and three car garages, and in this community—its like the parents have one car and it’s barely working...

She saw this as particularly problematic because “they’re [the rich kids] are whizzing by them [the low income kids] with one person in the car...” and therefore she decided to advocate for these students at the school board meetings. Eventually, the decision was reached to bus more students at the taxpayers’ expense—a victory for low-income students. Sarah implies that the transportation decision was made on ideological equity grounds—however, observations of school board meetings reveal otherwise. Observations suggest that the debate was more about high-quality education services, the costs to taxpayers, and concerns over crime and safety than about poverty and equity. While some stakeholders felt that equity was a non-issue—reflecting

the Old Boys Club mentality, concerns about children getting beaten up on their walk to school best reflected the Magnet narrative and fears over safety and community change. While the Rainmaker narrative provided a crucial counter perspective, the ASD transportation policy was not a strong example of the community responding proactively to socioeconomic changes.

The “Gold Medal Lunch” however, is a different. For years, the school district and local businesses worked together to host the lunch for students who had all their schoolwork handed in on time. However, in response to rising poverty in the district, a number of teachers and school employees voiced dissatisfaction with the program. As Anne, a school leader discusses:

now that has changed [the Gold Medal Lunch] because of our kids of poverty, only because a lot of people are saying, “its not fair, there are kids who come from poor homes, unstructured homes, and you’re penalizing them because they are not getting their work in on time and that’s too hard.” So this big program that had run for years and years was disbanded, and very unfortunately I think, because I think you’ve got to set standards for kids...And even if you come from a dysfunctional family, you have to learn to rise above that dysfunction.

Based on resistance from teachers, the program was reworked to recognize students for accomplishments less closely tied to their home conditions. This change however, conflicted with the Magnet narrative’s resistance to adapting services to meet families’ needs.

Lastly, the Acreville recycling permit policy illustrates the interaction between the Magnet and Rainmaker narratives in the broader community. For instance, Austen, a general influential, found out that the Acreville government denied 100 families living in subsidized housing permits for the recycling center because it was perceived that they did not pay taxes—a true Magnet-like attempt to create barriers for families in poverty. By calling a collaborative

meeting with central stakeholders, she remedied the situation and provided these families with their permits. As Austen explains, however, the recycling permit policy impacted low-income children and youth who felt ostracized from the Acreville community:

when you're a young person who is with their parents in the car and you're turned away from the recycling centers and you're treated like less for one reason or another you start to feel that you don't belong in the community, that no one cares.

With the narratives outlined, I turn now to the discussion and significance of this study.

### **Discussion, Significance, and Implications**

While suburban poverty literature suggests that some suburbs are devoid of anti-poverty organizations (Allard, 2004; A. Murphy & Wallace, 2010), Acreville is surprisingly home to a number of innovative programs, practices, and services. Although it does not have a homeless shelter, there are community providers attempting to build one. In fact, in some ways, Acreville, could serve as a model to other communities—at least on paper. However, matters related to community identity, class, race, and geographic space often thwart the full potential of these well-intentioned responses. In this section, I connect my findings to sensemaking as well as to the extant literature on suburban poverty and student and family homelessness. I also outline the significance of this study to theory and scholarship and explore potential implications for policy and practice.

#### **Sensemaking**

Thayer (1988) suggests that leaders are “sensegivers” and “meaningmakers.” I suggest that when guided by the Rainmaker narrative, leaders aim to help the community by “sensegiving” and shaping others’ perceptions. In doing so, the Rainmaker narrative sometimes

molded policy outcomes in ways that facilitated positive educational opportunities for students and families experiencing poverty and homelessness.

Weick and colleagues (1995; 2005) argues that in sensemaking, questions of identity such as “who am I/we?” become crucial. In the process of sensemaking, my findings suggest that participants constructed not only their own identity, and the identity of others, but also the identity of their district and community. Central to these identities were constructs about race, class, and geographic space. For instance, in rewriting the Acreville School District mission statement, stakeholders debated the district’s identity and how they wanted ASD to look in the future—with discussions centering on responses to racial, socio-economic, and community change. Likewise, many school and community leaders, such as Father Jim, reconstructed community-level notions of “who we are.”

Weick (1995) also highlights the importance of plausibility over accuracy. He argues that individuals or groups do not need accurate accounts but rather good stories and therefore myths, metaphors, and fables can be important. This was clearly evident with the myth of the billboards as a perceived main cause of Acreville’s poverty. Weick argues that accuracy can sometimes limit action, so plausibility is more important. However, in this case, plausibility was often associated with action that was not in the best interest of families experiencing poverty and homelessness particularly because it shaped perceptions of families living in subsidized housing.

Acreville’s policy on recycling permits reflects the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy, which Weick (1995) suggests is where people see what their expectations suggest they would see. As leaders created their own environment, the recycling permits also illustrate the sensemaking property of enactment. In this case, the Acreville government deemed public housing residents to be undesirable residents. They denied them recycling permits—which led to

televisions being abandoned on the front lawn. This confirmed what people expected to see and justified perceptions about low-income housing tenants as undesirable neighbors. The self-fulfilling prophecy however, had stigmatizing consequences for families and students living in subsidized housing.

While I apply sensemaking to poverty and homelessness, I also explore the theory in a unique way. Weick's (1995) work focuses on sensemaking at the individual or organizational level. Some educational research has addressed collective sensemaking—such as in the context of school-based professional learning communities (Coburn, 2001). My study, however, examines it at the cross-sector, community level.

### **Blurring Urban and Suburban Boundaries**

By explicitly foregrounding the suburban context, this study extends the educational scholarship on student and family homelessness—which tends to draw data from higher-density, urban communities (e.g. Grothaus et al., 2011; Hallett, 2012; Miller, 2011c; Pavlakis, 2013). It also builds on the work of Miller and Bourgeois (2013), which highlighted the geographic dispersion of homelessness and suggested that suburban school districts may struggle to respond.

Turning explicitly to the suburban poverty literature, A. Murphy (2010) suggests that in order to develop appropriate policy tools, policymakers need an understanding of the complexities of suburban poverty and how locals perceive it. In this way, my findings contribute to the small but growing body of literature on suburban poverty and can aid in the development of policy approaches. Not only do I help to usher the suburban poverty literature into the education sector, but I also extend “urban education” to broader geographic places—beyond the inner ring suburbs. I highlight the blurred boundaries of urban education, the spillovers and intersections with suburban areas. I caution readers to avoid interpreting my findings to suggest

that inner city poverty no longer matters. Urban poverty rates remain higher than suburban rates (Baker, 2015). Yet, Acreville leaders *are* confronting rising poverty and homelessness—with little history and experience in addressing these challenges. Likewise, socio-economic and racial changes have led to concerns about crime, safety, and gangs. While there is little evidence of an increased crime rate in Acreville, these perceptions mold educational opportunities for families and students and thus require attention. This disconnect between perceptions and reality is unlikely to be unique to Acreville; interestingly, the work of Sampson (2012) highlights that, despite popular belief, residing in neighborhoods with high percentages of immigrants is actually associated with lower rather than higher levels of violence.

Some of Acreville's promising practices—which are quite unique for a relatively affluent suburban community—are borrowed from urban areas such as New York City, Baltimore, and Oakland, but adapted to more appropriately fit the suburban context. For instance, while some school sites in cities such as New York have school-based health centers with on-site dental services (Albert, McManus, Mitchell, 2005), Acreville's lower concentration of poverty makes such approaches impractical—rather leaders work with nearby providers to increase access to dental services and ensure that students can make it to appointments by overcoming transportation and scheduling barriers. Likewise, some anti-poverty organizations, which tend to situate themselves in large urban areas, take a “neighborhood approach” to provision—positioning individuals and offices in residential areas right where low-income students and families live. Yet, while the concentration of poverty in certain urban neighborhoods may make this approach particularly effective, Acreville and other suburbs like it, have “pockets of poverty” (A. Murphy, 2010, p. 1172), which may hinder the efficacy of such a model. In fact, Acreville was not able to work with a national non-profit which provides services to low-income

youth because the non-profit's urban-centric model was not appropriate to the geographic dispersion of Acreville's poverty. Acreville's one-stop-shop, on the other hand, was located in the center of town, which was traversed by a larger percentage of low-income families than any one neighborhood would be—although transportation obstacles did persist. Acreville's suburban adaptations could serve as a model to similarly positioned communities who are also facing poverty-problems that we previously considered to be “city problems.” In this sense, we are left with a hopeful picture of a response to a recent educational phenomenon—the geographic spread of poverty and homelessness.

### **Recommendations for Research, Policy and Practice**

In this section, I outline a number of recommendations for research, policy, and practice. First, it is important to expand education scholarship on suburban poverty and homelessness. The suburban poverty literature suggests that there are multiple types of suburban communities (Cooke, 2010; Holiday & Dwyer, 2009; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Mikelbank, 2004; A. Murphy, 2010; M. Orfield, 2002)—this study examined a single site and one type of suburb. It is also based on a purposive sample but generalizability was not my goal. Rather I aimed to provide rich description so that the reader can decide the extent to which my findings may be applicable to other locations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Scholars are just beginning to examine how suburban communities are responding to broad community change (i.e. Frankenberg & G. Orfield, 2012; Welton, Diem, & Holme, 2013; Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014). As such, more education research is needed on diverse types of suburban communities. There is also an urgent need for more scholarship that considers the unique contours of student and family homelessness or other poverty-related challenges such as school mobility. Scholars should consider taking a metropolitan area as the unit of analysis in

order to explore the diverse suburban communities and districts within it. While the purpose of this study was to capture sensemaking among leaders, future work should broaden the concept of “community” and consider families’ sensemaking as well.

School leaders should also leverage McKinney-Vento in order to create spaces for local and regional dialogue. According to Weick (1995), more information alone will not advance sensemaking because the process is about confusion rather than ignorance. Instead, stakeholders need to discuss and debate, using wide-ranging data to create fresh frameworks. Since McKinney-Vento includes a mandate for schools and districts to collaborate with diverse stakeholders (McKinney-Vento, 2001), school leaders should use the Act to create meeting spaces for “sensegiving” in the broader community. This type of work can be extended to the regional level as well. Scholars have argued for regional collaboration in order to reduce barriers for families (Kneebone & Berube, 2013), such as by coordinating transportation routes, but regional collaboration could also assist in challenging perceptions and spurring re-evaluations of sensemaking among leaders—particularly as agencies share data, programs and practices across geographic spaces. For example, Kings County Washington built cross-sector, cross-geographic coalitions in order to improve educational outcomes for students experiencing poverty (Brookings Institute, 2015).

My findings also suggest the importance of revisiting how we prepare educational leaders. Students who plan to or currently work in suburban spaces should also gain experience in urban spaces. This could occur through a rotating fieldwork or internship component or even through group work with students who do have field experience in urban areas. Urban leadership education programs should consider hosting professional development and two-way learning sessions for suburban leaders.

Lastly, and particularly because of the racialized nature of the sensemaking narratives, there is an urgent need to increase diversity among school leaders. Despite ASD's efforts (the district, for instance, changed their interview questions to address matters of positionality and cultural competency and hosts professional development on race and diversity) the district lacks leaders of color—a problem also noted by Holme et al. (2014) in a suburban district in Texas. Multiple Acreville leaders recognized this as concerning and a couple of school leaders reported that families of color identified the lack of diversity as a barrier to their educational opportunities. The district should ensure that their hiring packages (both salary and in kind benefits) are competitive to draw a diverse applicant pool and should create internal programs to support the leadership development of promising teachers, other school employees, and families who are active in the African American parents' group or other education-related networks. Yet, the sheer lack of diversity among community providers, government officials, and business representatives is also concerning given the importance of cross-sector action in effectively serving families and students experiencing homelessness (Miller, 2013). Community providers should ensure that hiring practices encourage and prioritize diversity.

Providers should also capitalize on untapped opportunities to work closely with families experiencing poverty and homelessness in order to improve services, expand educational opportunities, and engender leadership development among residents already living and working in Acreville. Families who use the food pantry can be provided with work and eventual leadership opportunities through the one-stop-shop. The one-stop-shop and community school sites should also serve as the location for school board meetings and other policy-oriented events in order to increase access and participation.

Taken together, these recommendations may better position suburban communities—like Acreville—with the necessary tools and supports to address change and better meet the diverse needs of its residents. With the onset of rising family poverty and homelessness in the suburbs, it is more important than ever to work towards the shared goal of continuously improving the educational opportunities of all students.

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## **Chapter 5:**

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation is the culmination of six years of professional experience as a teacher, researcher, and policy analyst in addition to nearly four years of doctoral study and inquiry. The task of cohesively tying my learning experiences into a single dissertation was challenging. To guide me in this endeavor, I searched ProQuest Dissertation and Theses for “three-article format” or “three article dissertation,” and found 130 results, suggesting that others have certainly engaged in this task (i.e. Coleman, 2014; Leonardi, 2014; Wann, 2013). From these results, I extracted a sample of 7 recent dissertations that were relevant to education policy and/or leadership and created an inventory of how the authors addressed this challenge. I highlighted the common themes across the dissertations and used this inventory to guide the organization of my work. In this section, I assess how Chapters 2, 3, and 4 form a collection of work that contributes to and advances research, theory, policy, and practice. I first examine how the collection adds to our empirical knowledge about homeless and highly mobile (HHM) students and families and then outline some suggestions for future research. Next, I explore how the set of papers contribute to how we might re-conceptualize theory. Lastly, I turn to policy and practice—considering what this dissertation as a whole suggests about how to best improve educational opportunities and experiences for HHM students and families going forward.

### **Research**

Chapter 2 (*Living and Learning at the Intersection*) found that the multifaceted policy environment—fundamentally molded by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento) and federal rehousing policies such as the Homeless Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (HEARTH)—played an important role in shaping families’ school-

related experiences. Depending on their residential context, or the space in which they were living, parents faced unique barriers and opportunities to both accessing and mobilizing wide-ranging educational resources. At times, their school-related experiences were remarkably different from one another. Fundamentally, when meaningful cross-sector collaboration existed, as it sometimes did between school actors and neighborhood-based social workers, families benefited. While some research has examined McKinney-Vento (e.g. James & Lopez, 2003; Miller, 2011a; Tanabe & Mobley, 2011; Wong et al., 2009), this article contributes to the literature by exploring McKinney-Vento's intersections with federal rehousing policies and by drawing these broader social policies into the educational domain. By including the perspectives of families impacted by housing first, this article also extends Miller's (2011b, 2012) analyses of residential context.

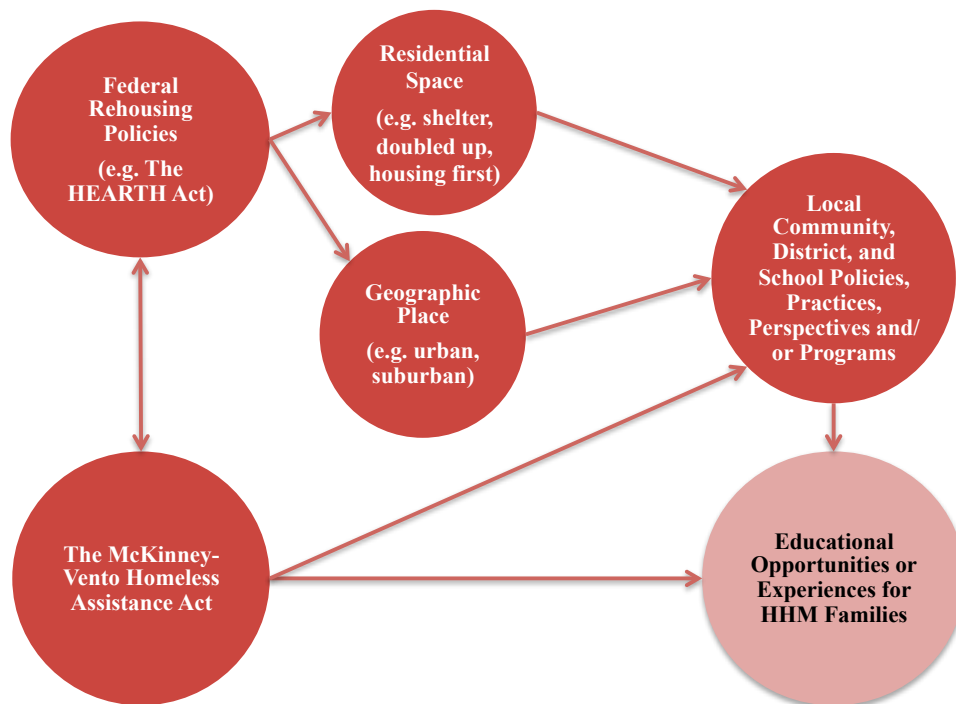
Chapter 3 (*Reaching All Families*) found that in many cases, parents, school employees, and community providers had different understandings of and experiences with family-school-community partnerships (FSCPs). HHM parents highly valued education and often established homework routines, yet they also faced unique barriers to maintaining a home context that supported learning. School and community stakeholders often varied greatly in the extent to which they were cognizant—and responsive—to these challenges. This was reflected not only in school employee's relationships with families but also in the connections built between school and community actors. In important ways, this variability molded the learning opportunities for HHM students. While not always pertinent, at times the diverse residential contexts (the spaces in which families resided) also influenced parents' opportunities to advocate for their children's educational wellbeing. The residential context sometimes shaped opportunities to create a home context that supports learning or to attend to school events. Importantly, however, Chapter 3

also found that schools spent different amounts of time working with families based on the residential spaces families were living in—yet these practices did not always align with families' reported needs. Building upon Yon and Sebastien-Kadie (1994) and Grothaus, Lorelle, Anderson & Knight (2011), this chapter extends empirical understandings on HHM families by exploring FSCPs with a particular emphasis on residential diversity.

Chapter 4 (*Poverty and Homelessness at the Metropolitan Margins*) moves from the urban core of Midtown to the nearby suburb of Acreville. This chapter found that school and community leaders constructed or invoked racialized narratives about their suburban town, which they used to defend their actions or the actions of others around matters of poverty and homelessness. In particular, four narratives were identified: the Magnet narrative, the Rainmaker narrative, the Savior narrative, and the Old Boys Club narrative. These four narratives reflected ideologies around community identity, poverty, and race and they were often evident in local policies and practices. At times, they also interacted with one another, serving to shape the educational opportunities of students and families experiencing poverty and homelessness. Because much of the literature on student and family homelessness tends to be situated in urban centers (e.g. Grothaus et al., 20011; Hallett, 2012; Miller, 2011b; Pavlakis, 2014), this work broadens empirical understandings of matters of HHM families. It also extends the work of Miller and Bourgeois (2013)—which suggested that suburban school districts might face unique challenges in responding to homelessness and high mobility—by explicitly exploring a suburban district and community. Furthermore, the suburban poverty literature calls for more work on the intricacies of suburban poverty and how locals understand it (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Murphy 2010). Hence, Chapter 4 contributes to the suburban poverty literature and assists in

connecting this body of work to educational research. Overall, it serves to extend “urban education” and draws attention to the blurred boundaries between suburban and urban areas.

Figure 1 illustrates how the collection of work presented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 contribute to research. Broadly speaking, this body of work examines the relationships between wide-ranging policies and the educational opportunities and experiences for HHM families. While each paper has empirical value independently, when taken together, a broader picture of homelessness, high mobility, and schooling emerges. As Figure 1 shows, federal rehousing policies mold where and how students and families live (residential space and geographic place). These spaces and places shape community, district, and school-level policies, practices, perspectives, and programs, which in turn have impacts for HHM families’ educational opportunities and experiences. Likewise, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act both directly (through its provisions) and indirectly (by shaping local policies and practices) molds outcomes. As illustrated by the two-sided arrow, at times, the interactions between federal rehousing policies and McKinney-Vento also uniquely shape families’ opportunities and experiences.



*Figure 1.* Space, place, schooling and policy.

Taken together, this dissertation furthers understandings around space, place, schooling, and policy and highlights the diversity around matters of homelessness and high mobility for schools, communities, and families.

This dissertation also has a number of recommendations for future research. Generally speaking, there is a need to increase scholarship on matters related to HHM families and schooling. More research is needed which examines various types of districts and communities—scholars should consider situating studies in places with distinctly different

rehousing and education policy environments. Likewise, more work is needed that draws from the typologies of suburban communities and explores different types of geographic spaces. Furthermore, to propel the field forward, future research should include the voices and perspectives of different and wide-ranging actors including landlords, host families, and students themselves.

### **Theory**

In his presidential address to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in April of 1974, Patrick Suppes urged educational scholars and researchers to apply and generate theories in order to advance the field (Suppes, 1974). His call seems anachronistic now, as scholars today often (but not always) use theory in their work—helping to secure, in the words of Suppes, “the place of theory in educational research” (Suppes, 1974, p. 3). However, this is not to suggest that theory is always utilized for the same reasons or that it is applied in uniform ways. In this section, I look to Suppes and other scholars to briefly explore why theory is used. I then revisit how theory is used in this dissertation and the ways in which each article contributes to theoretical reconceptualizations. Lastly, I draw connections between the three main theories, Nan Lin’s network theory of social capital, Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence, and Karl Weick’s theory of sensemaking, in order to provide cohesion to this collection of work as a whole.

#### **Why Theory?**

Suppes (1974) outlines a number of arguments, of varying significance, for the use of theory in educational research. First, he suggests that theory is successful in other fields such as the natural sciences, so it may also be useful in education (although he recognizes the limitations of this argument). Second, and in a more convincing line of thought, he argues: “a powerful

theory changes our perspective on what is important and what is superficial” (Suppes, 1974, p. 4). In this sense, theory can lead to dramatic reorganizations of how we view and think about the world. Mirroring this, Dressman (2007) conducted an examination of the use of social theory in literacy research and found that one of the ways theory mattered was that it served “as a source of new insight on the social nature of literacy” (p. 333). A third argument proposed by Suppes was that theory could help to advance understandings of complicated processes—an important purpose because educational issues are multifaceted. Here, a primary use of theory in educational research is and should be “to seek mechanisms or processes that answer the question of why a given aspect of education works the way it does.” (p. 5). In this sense, theories can serve an “explanatory” purpose (Sanderland, 1990, p. 250).

Suppes (1974) also critiques Dewey’s focus on inquiry without attention to theory, arguing instead that theories can potentially serve as tools to help in problem solving. While Sanderland (1990) is critical of the potential to align theory and practice, he discusses “theories of action” which “attempt to close, or at least narrow, the gap between theory and action by making action their subject” (p. 249). Lastly, Suppes suggests that empiricism void of theory does not serve much purpose; he argues that it does “not provide even a practical guide for future experience or policy...[or] methods of prediction or analysis. In short, bare empiricism does not generalize” (Suppes, 1974, p. 6). Once again, Dressman (2007) came to a similar conclusion arguing that social theory enabled scholars to connect findings “to more general principles” (p. 333).

### **Use of Theory and Theoretical Contributions**

Not only are there multiple reasons *why* theory is used but there are also a myriad of ways *in which* scholars apply theory (Dressman, 2007). Dressman (2007) examined 69 articles

on social theory and literacy research and found wide variety in the extent to which theory shaped the conceptualization, design, analysis, and conclusion of the studies. Coupled with this, there were wide differences in the degree to which scholars' viewed their findings to be in harmony or in discord with theory. With this in mind, I turn now to how I applied theory in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In each study, I sought to avoid allowing my theoretical framework to hinder my data analysis, so I did not engage in tightly deductive data analysis processes. This was important because as Eisner (1984) points out:

Like language, theory is both an asset and a liability. It is an asset because it provides guidelines for perception: it points us in directions that enable us to see. But it is also a liability because while it provides the windows through which we obtain focus, it creates walls that hamper our perception of those qualities and processes that are not addressed by the concepts we have chosen to use (p. 450).

Just as Dressman (2007) found diverse ways in which theory was used, theory also played varying roles in my articles.

In Chapter 2, I draw organizational insights from Nan Lin's network theory of social capital (1999, 2000), which focuses on the factors that influence the *access to* and *mobilization of* relationships and resources. While I apply this theory to a new context—the intersection between McKinney-Vento and federal rehousing policies, my “empirical findings exist in symmetry, balance, and harmony” with Lin's work (Dressman, 2007, p. 345). In essence, I contribute to the theory by applying it in a novel context. Since I find his work to be aptly fitting to my findings, I do little to challenge or critique the theory.

In Chapter 3, I not only garner organizational guidance from Epstein's (2011) theory of overlapping spheres of influence and framework of six types of involvement, but I also critique

and extend it in the context of HHM families. Here, my choice of a theory was based on practice. Epstein's language and materials are commonly applied in schools and districts across the country (including Midtown). Coupled with this, there is little to no scholarship examining the theory from the perspective of homelessness. In a number of ways, Epstein's theory (particularly its recent versions) served as useful guidance for my study. However, Chapter 3 also considers a couple of theoretical implications for Epstein's work going forward. For instance, in order to better align Epstein's theory with the realities of homelessness, I suggest potential changes to both the external and internal models of the theory. There is a need for the model to explicitly consider residential space as a factor influencing how partnerships between schools, communities, and families are fostered. Likewise, the pivotal role social workers and other actors play in generating and sustaining partnerships should be integrated into the model. Compared to Chapter 2, Chapter 3 poses challenges to the theory and contributes more substantially to theoretical reconceptualizations.

In Chapter 4, sociological theories of sensemaking, particularly the work of Karl Weick (1995) provided helpful insights to my study of how school and community leaders make sense of rising poverty and homelessness in a growing suburb. Broadly speaking, sensemaking addresses how people attach meaning to their experiences—particularly when faced with change or crisis. It was an apt theory for my research question because the suburb of Acreville—a place that is relatively affluent and majority white—had experienced dramatic, and unexpected shifts in poverty and homelessness. These shifts served as a “change” (or to some, perhaps even a “crisis”), which made the time ripe to explore how leaders understood and responded to matters of rising poverty and homelessness. Chapter 4 contributes to theory in a number of ways. First of all, to my knowledge, sensemaking has not been applied to issues of homelessness in the

suburbs. Second, I employ sensemaking on a cross-sector, community-level (rather than focus on individuals or organizations). I also take issue with Weick's property of "plausibility over accuracy." While Weick argues that individuals or groups do not need perfect information to engage in sensemaking, but plausible stories will do, I highlight how a focus on plausibility over accuracy can have potentially negative consequences for students and families experiencing poverty and homelessness.

### **Connecting the Theories**

On the surface, it may appear that there is little connecting the disparate theories used in this collection of work. Each theory informs a distinctly different aspect of society or human nature. What are the commonalities between a theory that examines networks and resources to one that aims to assist schools in building partnerships with families and communities, to another that focuses on how people and groups make sense of their experiences? Importantly, each theory is based on relationships—that is, each one fundamentally focuses on the connections and interactions between and amongst people and groups. While social capital clearly foregrounds relationships, Epstein's (2011) theory also addresses the relationships between schools, families and communities. Likewise, sensemaking does not occur in a vacuum, but is "social" and based on interactions with others (Weick, 1995).

Alongside this commonality, the theories are also connected because of the unified purpose they serve in this body of work. In the context of homelessness, each theory helps deepen understandings about the factors that shape educational opportunities for families and students. For instance, social capital theory allows me to examine HHM families' networks and how the resources embedded in their relationships mold schooling experiences and educational opportunities. Epstein (2011) enables me to foreground how the diverse conditions of

homelessness relate to partnership building and thus access to wide-ranging educational opportunities for students. Lastly, sensemaking allows me to hone in on how school and community leaders' understandings of community change manifest in local policies, practices, and programs, which in turn may construct the educational opportunities and constraints faced by families experiencing poverty and homelessness. Taken together, the theories allow me to deliver a much deeper, fine-grained exploration of the factors that mold educational opportunities than any one theory would be capable of contributing on its own.

In his 1952 book, *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*, Lewin wrote, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (p. 169). Vansteenkiste and Sheldon (2006) explain this famous epigram as follows, "...theorists should strive to create theories that can be used to solve social or practical problems, and practitioners and researchers in applied psychology should make use of available scientific theory" (p. 63). While the compatibility of theory and practice is debatable (Sandelands, 1990), I aspire to work towards Lewin's lofty goal of good theory as practical theory. I hope that this collection of work, in its application of theory and its contributions to theory, aligns with Lewin's message by "simultaneously help[ing] us to understand human nature, and, know[ing] what to do in order to maximize it" (Vansteenkiste & Sheldon, 2006, p. 77).

### **Policy and Practice**

*There is an oft-quoted line that the two things you should probably never watch being made are sausages and public policy (Lomas, 2000, p. 140).*

*That enterprise known as educational research is predicated on the supposition that research is vital to the improvement of educational practice (Eisner, 1984, p. 447).*

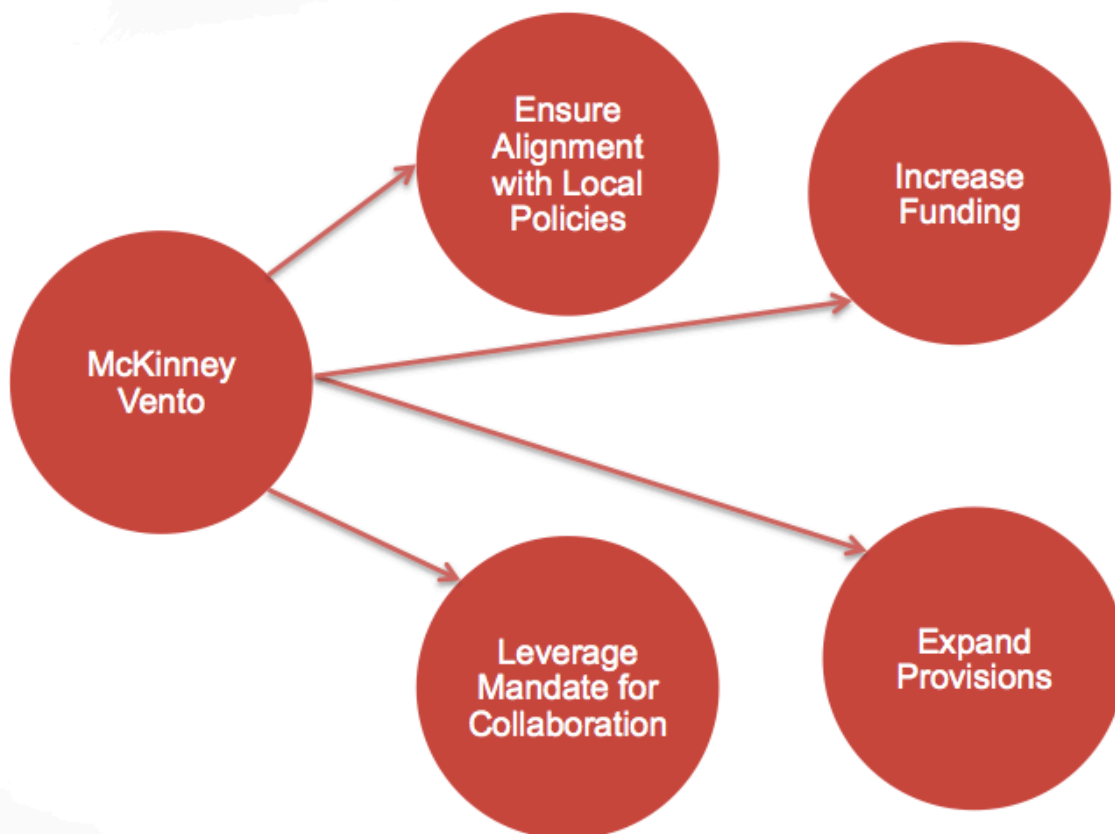
Connecting research to policy and practice can be complex, lofty, and at times an overly idealistic goal (see Eisner, 1984; Lomas, 2000; Wilson, 2002). Policymakers and practitioners

are facing pressures to address and respond to pressing questions in policy and practice—*now*. While policymakers and practitioners face immediate problems, scholars may be engaged in multi-year studies that may not address the same questions or may not result in executable action points. These diverse actors often also occupy different worlds. Scholars may naively view decision making as an event, rather than “a diffuse, haphazard, and somewhat volatile process” while policymakers may have little understanding that “research too, is more of a process than a product” (Lomas, 2000, p. 140). Likewise, Eisner (1984) points out how often educational researchers are disconnected from the lived realities of schools. This discrepancy in understanding can hinder the applicability of research to policy and practice. For instance, in Eisner’s (1984) interviews with 30 school administrators, not one school leader could give examples of how they used research to guide decisions or shape practice and “some simply said that research has little to do with their work” (p. 448). In a similar vein, there was a gap of 263 years between when the British merchant navy included citrus juice in sailor’s diets and when the preventative value of citrus for scurvy was identified (Lomas, 2000).

I acknowledge the complex relationship between research, policy and practice not to suggest that scholars should not concern themselves with such causes. Rather, I aim to highlight ways in which research may work closer towards shaping (or perhaps inspiring) policy and practice. Wilson (2002) suggests that social scientists “should be more flexible about the kinds of data they use and the way they use them” and avoid privileging quantitative work as having the monopoly over contributing to policy debates (p. iii). Lomas (2000) highlights that rather than simply communicating at the end of a research study, there needs to be stronger links (built earlier on) between researchers and policymakers. I believe the same could be said of the connections between researchers and practitioners.

As a scholar, I aim to ensure that my work—to the extent possible—is applicable to policy and practice. The research questions raised in this dissertation are not only rooted in the extant literature, but also in conversations with colleagues and mentors at the university and in interactions with policy experts, school leaders, and community providers. Furthermore, the voices of wide-varying stakeholders in schools and communities are foundational to the data from which my recommendations for policy and practice stem. In this vein, I hope that my recommendations for policy and practice resonate with decision makers, practitioners, and service providers.

Rather than reiterate each and every recommendation for policy and practice, I use this space to provide cohesion to the recommendations presented in this collection of work (see Figure 2). Across Chapters 2, 3, and 4, my policy recommendations focus heavily on McKinney-Vento. In order to improve educational opportunities for HHM students and families, I suggest that stakeholders advocate for increased funding for McKinney-Vento, along with expanded provisions (such as clear language to cover students who become “permanently” housed in the middle of the school year). I also suggest that school actors ensure that McKinney-Vento is aligned with local policies (such as on parental involvement) and that they leverage the mandate for collaboration to strengthen partnerships and create spaces for local and regional dialogue around matters of poverty and homelessness.



*Figure 2.* Policy recommendations.

Another related theme is the importance of creating infrastructure to enable wide-ranging stakeholders to learn from one another, refresh frameworks, and develop innovative solutions and practices around matters of homelessness and high mobility. These spaces must however, consider and include HHM students and families themselves. Through district-wide professional development, community-level meetings held in inclusive spaces, or better yet, metropolitan or regional networks, stakeholders are more likely to break down silos and develop effective, collaborative relationships. Across this body of work, cross-sector collaboration appears to be key to improving educational opportunities for HHM students and their families.

In order to ensure that the lessons learned in this dissertation reach beyond the “Ivory Tower,” it is important to me to return to many of the stakeholders who inspired my research questions or contributed their voices to this collection of work. This has (and will continue to take) the form of disseminating my work through outlets in addition to peer-reviewed academic journals (such as blogs and policy reports) and participating in two-way discussions with diverse stakeholders at county-level board meetings, district offices, schools, and wide-ranging community settings. Because I aim to advance educational opportunities for HHM students and their families, the relationship between research, theory, policy and practice is of vital importance.

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