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Literacy Scholars Coming to Know the People in the Parks, Their Literacy Practices and Support Systems

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Literacy Scholars Coming to Know the People in the Parks,

Their Literacy Practices and Support Systems

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LITERACY SCHOLARS COMING TO KNOW

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Abstract

In this research, literacy scholars present the voices of the people who live in the parks near their state capital and university in a south-eastern city in the United States. Through the recorded, transcribed and analyzed conversations, we report the literacy practices of the people in the parks and their insights into the nested state and university structures that restrict and empower their quality of life opportunities. The general findings show our participants to be avid readers of a variety of genres and users of technology but with limited access to state and university resources and infrastructures due to laws and regulations and community members' negative perceptions that restrict their use. Recommendations are made for more urban community state and university collaborative initiatives to increase understandings and respect for people who live in the parks to honor their motivations for greater social capital and attainment of their life goals.

Keywords: people who are homeless; literacy practices of people who are homeless; critical literacy scholars.

Introduction*Samuel's Excerpt 1*

Interviewer (I): Right. What is the problem?

Respondent (R): The problem is that there's no jobs (*emphatic intonation*).

I: Uh, huh {kids playing in the background}

R: -- and ... and these people out here, they need help - They homeless – people need to get..., had jobs, nice jobs, homes, houses, they done lost everything...

I: Uh, huh

R: -- They out here livin' on the streets now, and instead of tryin' to help these people get back, to you know, bein' able to uh, be independent...

I: Uh, hum

R: You know, just like a couple minutes ago, you see all all these police officers walkin' through here? (*His voice sounds very emphatic and frustrated about the homelessness*)

I: Yes, I saw them.

I: And, we got time to play, to pay police officers to walk down through here. We can be takin' that money be helpin' somebody that's tryin' to get on their feet.

I: Right.

R: It's not about tryin' to contain it, hiring more government to control it. I:

Right.

R: It's about helpin' those people so they don't have to have...

I: Right.

R: More containment.

I: Right.

R: In most of these cities, if you look down here ... there's not a motel,

I: Uh, huh...

R: or a restaurant,

I: Uh, huh...

R: or a government building,

I: Uh, huh...

R: that's it.

I: Right.

R: There is no factories, no jobs or nothin', unless it's a college.

I: Right.

In the above excerpt, Samuel (pseudonym), a self-declared, person who is homeless, refers to the economic climate of “no jobs”, “no factories” or “nothin' ”and he cites the “lack of support” needed to become “independent” and to “get back on his feet.” Samuel also talks about the “police officers” and “containment,” words suggesting being patrolled and kept in certain places. Despite this, we hear that Samuel has “had something” and wants to “become independent” and to “get back on his feet.” Samuel is hopeful, has aspirations, and recognizes that he needs help to move on in his life.

In this research project, *The Literacies of the People in the Parks*, five educational researchers set out to examine and understand the symbolic and dynamic interplay of factors on the literacy engagements of people who frequent three parks. The parks are located in the heart of downtown near a university and the state capital in a southeastern city in the United States.

The opening lines from Samuel's excerpt eloquently capture three important points: (1) at the personal level, a desire to be in a better situation and the recognition that help is needed; (2) at the local community level, the presence of those members who can serve to impact what is possible for those who live in the parks on a regular daily basis; and (3), the larger societal political and economic level regarding jobs and housing. In this paper we use the voices of the people in the parks to examine and understand their literacies, urban communities, and institutional structures to construct how they make sense of their lives, literacy engagements and futures. Our key questions are:

1. What are the literacy (reading and writing) practices of the people in the parks?
2. What are the views of the people in the parks regarding the impact of the local community and the wider society on their literacy development and futures?

Theoretical Frameworks: Our Interconnectedness

Ecological, semiotic and sustainable approaches to researching and teaching and learning (in communities) recognize the dynamic interplay of the social, economic and political systems, structures and processes that impact the lives of individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2001; Franklin & Blyton, 2011; Steinberg, 2012). Bioecologist and co-founder of Headstart, a federal program for preschool children, Urie Bronfenbrenner's interdisciplinary view on the ecology of human development is particularly salient for the work described in this paper. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2001) stresses the interdependence between living organism and their surroundings. His major thesis is the view that "human abilities and their realization depend in significant degree on the larger social and institutional contexts of individual activity" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, para. 110) and how they deal with their environment. He describes this environment as "nested structures" and similar to a "set of Russian dolls" (para. 127-130) with the innermost being the

home or classroom and the interplay between them followed by elements in the wider society such as “a severe economic crisis” which could impact a person’s life (para. 141). The theory is seen in “systems terms” and not “linear” (para. 150) and as “reciprocal” (para. 155) between entities such as “dyads, triads and larger structures” (para. 160) and is dependent upon “the interconnections between and within environmental settings” (para. 165). Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes his view of the interconnectedness of the systems as similar to *macrosystems* (original italics), or “the patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture” with its similar accompanying micro-, meso-, and exosystems (para. 192). The micro system is a setting where the building blocks are directly experienced through face to face interaction such as at home or on the playground; the mesosystem is seen as the interrelations among two or more settings or microsystems such as where one lives and where one works; and the exosystem, on the other hand, may be one or more settings in which the participant has no interaction but which still impacts the person in some way such as housing laws and legislations. All the aforementioned are included in the macrosystem as consistent subcultural or cultural forms which are impacted by ideologies and beliefs due to race, class, and/or religion for example. Ecological transitions may also impact any one of the systems when a life altering event occurs such as getting a divorce, having a child, losing a job or one’s home.

Bronfenbrenner himself, described his work as ongoing. One limitation was the challenge of addressing ecological validity of any scientific endeavor if there is a “discrepancy between the subject’s perception and the environmental conditions intended or assumed by the investigator” (para. 478). Bronfenbrenner drew on Cole and Scribner’s 1974 work to address the issue on the interpretation of the social setting and their response was for the observer to have been a participant and experience in the subculture (para. 500). Bronfenbrenner also recommends

interviewing the participants retrospectively to see if the interpretation is the same as the investigator's (para. 514).

Christensen (2016) added to the critique and proposed a modified model of Bronfenbrenner's Development Ecology. Christensen believes that while there is great emphasis on the individual's interactions in different contexts, he contends that more attention needs to be focused on the individual's attributes such as the capacity to be resilient in surviving in negative circumstances. Christensen also believes that Bronfenbrenner's different systems need to include the global as well. His modified model included an intra level or the individual micro level (Christensen, 2016, p. 27). Christensen's views are especially salient considering those individuals who are on the margins of society such as those who live in the parks. The capital that one brings to an experience is vital for understanding and bearing in mind the whole person's attributes. Pierre Bourdieu (1983, 1984), James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (ND) are three theorists whose conceptions of social capital embody systems and networks that facilitate the "ties that enable the transfer of social resources" and ultimately "opportunities for advancement" on the strength of those ties or the "capital" one has (Johnson, O.D., 2012, p. 35). Beyond economic capital, Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital relates to the resources that one possesses such as one's level of education or job type which may or may not help one to advance in the world depending on the value society attributes to it. For James Coleman, social capital "comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action" (Coleman, 1988, p. 100). Coleman's social capital builds on relationships and "relies on trustworthiness of the social environment" (p. 102). Putnam's research shows how there has been a substantial decline in the levels of interconnectedness in the United States and argues that "[I]t is very important for my countrymen and me to figure out why that happened and how we can reverse

it” (Putnam, ND, p. 9). In conceptualizing human development and its interconnectedness to human capital as a source of strength or weakness, Gamarnikow (2003) reminds us that these are potentially contested spaces. Her research demonstrates the need for a critical perspective on social capital that gives importance to the role of education and its correlate of income.

Collectively, the theorists and researchers in this section point to some critical factors that we need to bear in mind as we engage in this project with the people in the parks. In appreciating our interconnectedness as human beings, as researchers we are hopeful that this research may shed light on how we see these relationships through the eyes of the people in the parks.

Our Stance on Literacies

Bronfenbrenner (2001) discusses how our experiences with subjective and objective forces can be “emotionally and motivationally loaded” (p. 5). From our walks through the parks near our university, we wanted to know more about the people who frequented the parks and being language and literacy researchers, we wanted our explorations to be about their literacy engagements. As critically conscious language and literacy researchers we believe in the power of education to transform and we realize that emotional, psychological, social, historical and economic structures influence access and equity and so we take a critical approach to our human interconnectedness and our social capital networks to interpret our work with the people in the parks (Ingraham Willis et al., 2008). We also understand the importance of how literacies are situated and how literacy practices are “patterned by social institutions and power relations, and some literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others” (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000, p. 12). We appreciate the multiliteracies that people possess, the variety of text forms and communication channels and accept a broad conceptualization of literacy (New London Group, 1996). We likewise, acknowledge, that some linguistic codes are more privileged

or deemed to be more acceptable than others and we are mindful of the equality of all discourses and linguistic types and variations (Hawkins, 2013; Nero, 2006; Orelus, 2014). Thus, we strive to embrace the voices and practices of the people in the parks to acknowledge how those, often times, hidden and taken for granted literacy practices are significant, dominant, and critical to the public and institutional policies and reforms. We, as researchers, need to make these practices visible for the well-being of our participants and for the public good (Cushman, 1996; Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). This view is particularly important for those populations that may be seen as “less than” and “on the fringes of society.” Our job then as critical literacy researchers is to bring the findings to light so that all can learn to appreciate the resources of marginalized groups and impact public policy. Bronfenbrenner (1979) reminds us that “concern with public policy on the part of researchers is essential for progress in the scientific study of human development” (p. 88).

Research Context

This research project took place in three parks located near our university and the state capital in a southeastern city in the United States. Our journey in this project began with a walk in the park by the first author. This particular walk in conjunction with the teaching of a theoretical models of literacy course inspired the project. The authors’ quest was first and foremost to get to know the unknown people in the parks through an examination of their literacy practices. However, our research was not designed to be exclusionary or to limit our work to one set of people or one ethnic group or gender. It turned out that our research participants ended up being mainly of one group of people (people who were without homes), and we decided to focus on this group. As literacy researchers and scholars, we attribute all humankind with the capacity to be literate in multiple ways. However, we would be most remiss if we did not acknowledge that our journey in “*Coming to Know the Other*” in conducting our research has been

transformative for all of us as we journeyed from knowing at a theoretically distant level to getting to know the Other at a proxemically personal level and in so doing, face our distant theories and subjective representatives of people who are without homes or homeless. This paper is therefore as much about how a team of researchers came to insightful knowledge through listening to our participants tell us about their literacy engagements as it is about the literacy engagements of this particular group of people. As one of us stated in our reflections:

I never knew how valuable this experience would be for me and how transformative it would have been. I also was not prepared for the passion it would stir in me in regard for the peoples in the parks; their literacy and life circumstances.

Research reports are not expected to have emotional overtones as illustrated in the above excerpt from our researcher reflective data. Yet, we would propose that for research to be impactful and transformative, it must touch the emotionality (and subjectivities) of the researchers in some way. Kincheloe, McLaren and Steinberg (2009) assert that, “research becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate relationship with emancipatory consciousness. Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guarded neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world” (p. 16). Indeed, while we value a dignified life for all human beings, this research has pushed us to truly consider our positionality and place of privilege as university professors/ doctoral students and the extent to which we truly live out our values in our research teaching and scholarship.

The Exosystem: Housing Availability

The United States (U.S.) Department of Housing and Urban Development (2015) executive summary states that “in January 2015, 564,708 people were homeless on a given night and that most (69 percent) were staying in residential programs for homeless people, and 31 percent were found in unsheltered locations” (p. 1). While there has been a 31 per cent reduction in the number of homeless people recorded between 2010 – 2015, the U.S. government had to extend the goal to end chronic homelessness from 2015 to 2017. There are many descriptors and terms to describe the state of homelessness, and in a notice from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued July 25, 2016 the descriptors range from: chronically homeless individual or families to those who live in emergency shelters, permanent supportive housing, in families with children, safe havens or unsheltered conditions. The chronically homeless are defined as “an individual with a disability who lives in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter and has been homeless for at least 12 months or on at least 4 separate occasions in the last 3 years where the combined occasions must total at least 12 months” (p. 2). The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2015) puts the state of homelessness into context when they state: “Homelessness may be decreasing, possibly due to improvements in the homeless assistance system, but this system alone cannot overcome the affordable housing crisis” and that “housing remains unaffordable for a large swath of the American public” (“Moving Forward,” para. 2). While the government’s efforts to classify and objectify homeless people minimizes structural problems Samuel in Excerpt One, helps to contextualize and put a human face on homelessness. As Samuel’s conversation depicts, the plight of the homeless is not just “*their*” problem, it is also *our* problem, as *their* circumstances affect *all* of society. Therefore, as university professors who may be perceived as distant and remote from people on the street or in the parks, and who may even position ourselves as

different from the people on the street or in the parks, we are heartened by the words of Ellen Cushman (1996), activist language and literacy scholar:

One of the most pressing reasons why composition scholars may not work in the community has to do with deeply rooted sociological distances between the two. Many universities sit in isolated relation to the communities in which they're located-isolated socially and sometimes physically as well. (p. 7)

However, our university is not isolated physically but sociologically from downtown. We endorse the beliefs of those critical researchers like Carolyn Shields (2012) who believes that, "activism and advocacy are marks of the public intellectual who takes a reasoned, moral and public stance based on the information and understanding one has" (p. 6). However, the information and understanding that one has must be critiqued, deconstructed and turned into action through our teaching, scholarly works, presentations and works with diverse individuals (Hill Collins, 2013).

Mesosystems: University Structures

Commitment from universities to encourage activism for homeless people is often a subject that is not hierarchically as important as other university endeavors. We agree that "universities have all too often been perceived as spatially and culturally disconnected and politically disengaged from the needs and concerns of the communities that surround them, unable, and sometimes quite unwilling, to develop meaningful and reciprocal relationships" (Allahwala et al., 2013, p. 43). University development and expansion can run roughshod over surrounding communities if administrators have limited vision and unspoken agendas to maintain extant power structures. On the other hand, universities committed to making a difference in their communities must seriously consider the task of positively impacting any

urban project endeavor. Partnerships, collaborations and conversations are important for universities to engage in with disenfranchised and minoritized groups. The University of Toronto, Scarborough for example, entered a partnership with non-profit organization in 2008, specifically the United Way of Greater Toronto. A community-based experiential program was established which provided students at the university the opportunity to build trust between campus and the community. Wayne State University, provides another example of a university that is working to engage with the local surrounding community. University administrators have devoted university resources to implement change in the city where the university is based. It has also made part of its mission to give service to the people of Detroit, Michigan (Ratner & Brumitt, 2006). Perry and Wiewel (2005) discuss the competing demands on urban universities and identify them as “important and complex” (p. 6) because they acknowledge the “political, economic, intellectual and ethical elements” that constitute the challenges and opportunities of building reciprocal relationships (p. 6). However, while we recognize the challenges, we believe that many traditional “power structures exist and if left unexamined, continue to reinforce the status quo about who has power, who doesn’t and what power looks like,” (Duenkel, Pratt, & Sullivan, 2014, p. 267) in the lives of the disenfranchised. What is needed is far more university and community partnerships though these partnerships need to be tempered by collaborative efforts and understandings that disrupt the traditional power relations of university personnel (Dewar & Isaac, 1998).

Mesosystems: Libraries

The city’s rules and regulations and their enforcers should have a vested interest in all humankind including those without homes. One way to demonstrate investment is to provide library services since homeless people depend on the library as a resource for information and it

can also be a place of “refuge for the poor and disenfranchised” (Mars, 2012, p. 32). Library services for the homeless can be restrictive and those restrictions can be disempowering, while violating the First Amendment of the Constitution for these patrons. In two court cases of library conduct codes, one case in New Jersey and another one in our nation’s capital, both cases were found to be violating rights of the homeless. In Morristown, New Jersey, Richard Kreimer, homeless, was evicted from the library because of his hygiene (Ayers, 2006; Kelly, 2006; Murphy, 1999). In the case in Washington, D.C., *Armstrong v. District of Columbia Library* (2001), Armstrong was denied access to the library due to his appearance and hygiene (Mars, 2012, p. 33). Both cases set precedence for the rights of people without home as the violations were stripping these citizens of their rights to “freedom of speech - a constitutional right that applies also to the right to *receive* information,” (Kelly, 2006, p.48). In the case of *Kreimer v. Bureau of Police for Township Morristown* (1991), the court ruled that the library as “a public forum, it cannot, as a governmental entity, condition access to freedom of speech—a constitutional right that applies also to the right to receive information,” (Kelly, 2006, p. 48). Later the Court of Appeals overturned the ruling based on the definition of what constitutes a governmental entity and it was decided that a library is a “limited public forum” (Ayers, 2006; Murphy, 1999). In the case of *Armstrong v. District of Columbia Library*, the court ruled that it was unconstitutional to deny Armstrong library access.

Libraries can serve as refuge centers for the homeless. If libraries collaborate with non-profit agencies and governmental agencies, together they can provide much needed support for the homeless. Training for library workers is essential because the homeless not only experience the lack of a place to reside, but they also are in danger of loss of dignity contingent on how they are treated in public spaces such as libraries (Mars, 2012).

Libraries above all can serve to build social capital for disenfranchised patrons and in fact may be the only place where people without homes can access information and digital media. Miller (2011) found that homeless people lack social capital and that often people who are supporting them in homeless shelters may also lack the connections to do their jobs effectively. Library personnel and other library patrons need to advocate for library access for those who are denied opportunities to develop themselves in these spaces (Hodgetts et al., 2008; Johnson, C.A., 2012). In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, Ruhlmann (2014) described how the Madison Public Library is a refuge for the homeless and serves as a community in providing support because the librarians believe that “the library has to serve as a uniquely egalitarian place” (p. 1).

Methods

The design of the study is a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000) and the unit of analysis (case) is the literacy practices of the people in the parks. Our recruitment plan required us to locate potential participants who “lived, worked, studied or played” in the parks near the university and the state capital. The participants for the study needed to be people who “hung out in the parks and were 18 years or older and met the requirement for either living, working studying or playing in the park.” The researchers visited the parks for a six-month period and always on Saturdays in the early afternoons in the fall and spring of 2013-14. Researchers worked in twos. One researcher initiated conversations, secured the necessary permissions and conducted the interview while the other made notes and recorded the conversation. Our participants were not hard to find and most of the people we approached were willing to talk with us once we had explained our purposes. The primary data included 22 participant interviews. Our participants were mainly African American men (11) who were

mostly homeless (10). We had a total of 15 men (11 homeless: 10 Black and 1 White) and 7 women of all racial backgrounds (African American, Asian, Latino, Black, Multiracial and White) and various ages from 18 -25 (2); 26-40 (5) and 41 and above (15). Of our 7 female participants 2 were homeless (1 White and 1 Black) for a total of 13 participants who were homeless (or approximately 60% of our total project participants). For this report, we are including only those participants who told us at the end of the interview that they were without homes when they responded to the question, “Where do you live?” Many of our 13 participants originally were from out of town and had lived in different states and cities. They had become homeless due to loss of jobs and health challenges. Some stated that they had had criminal records, health challenges, and relationship problems and were unable to find jobs. Of our 13 participants without homes, some had taken GED classes (2) and had enrolled in community colleges (1) and vocational schools (6) and had graduated high school (7). We had one participant with a BA degree.

To enhance data credibility and to ensure robust findings (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000), multiple data sources were gathered, and they included semi-structured interviews, observation data, researchers’ reflections, and geographic and historical information on the research setting. Constant comparison methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were used to identify and analyze patterns across the data and to reduce them into clusters of codes and then into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). During open coding, multiple researchers independently coded data and then met together to come to agreement on the emerging codes and categories that were then used to create a code book. The researchers independently recoded the data using the code book and peer examination was used to reach inter coder agreement among the researchers (Stake, 2000). During this process, the researchers discussed differences and queries with each other and

recoded the data again, where necessary. Next, the researchers collated the coded data by question type, analyzed and reduced these data into themes to answer individual research questions. The findings from this analysis are reported in this article. Included in the findings are excerpted transcriptions from our participants and insights from the researchers' note taking at the research site, reflections on the project and debriefing meetings.

Results and Discussion

Participants' Literacy Practices

Pete's Excerpt 2

I: Umm, you said you write poetry so how long have you been doing that?

R: I been doing that for years. I just write what's on my mind. That's what poetry is all about. Writing on how you feel so people can understand. You know what I'm saying, how you feel and what you feel all about and people is not willing to listen...how you feel.

I: Do you ever get a chance to present or anything?

R: No, I never get a chance to do that because sometimes I be afraid that people won't listen because they so into they self and not into...being into life. That's what writing is all about...

It's about helping somebody else out and not just helping yourself. And we trying to make the world better not worsen. So. I think a lot of people need to hear that...Yeah, especially from us, our color. We do so much and don't realize that we only just step out and do things differently things will be a whole lot better.

Andrew's Excerpt 3

When I write, um, I can write a legal motion text, from the top of my head. If you told me what it was about, about what you needed, um, preferably not criminal, but especially like, with civil work. Um, a lot of the statutes, or just, even if I don't know the statutes and codes, I have the, I know the language of proper format for legal motions, and so, I'll write stuff like that out.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's nested structures, at the very micro or personal level, we identify the literacy practices in which our participants engaged. *Literacy practices* are what people "do," and how people "talk" about and "make sense" of literacy and a social theory of literacy recognizes the link between the activities of reading and writing with the social structures in which they are embedded (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995). Our participants are engaged in numerous literacy practices on a daily basis. The previous excerpt from Pete's transcription demonstrates poetry writing. We experienced multiple narratives that were telling and humbling. We found that many of our African American male participants were avid chess players and played in tournaments for leisure. Within that group, they also relied on traditional literacy practices such as reading the Bible, books, magazines, and the newspaper. Some stated: "I read the Bible...and maybe some literature" or "I don't do much writing, I just like to read," "I read a lot of documentary books. I read a lot of, um, books about politics. I read a lot of human rights books," "I probably read maybe three or four novels, um, usually mystery or espionage," or "I'm a very conscientious reader. I had read five books by this particular author [Laura Hamilton] that I'm reading now." We found the majority of our participants to be avid readers who read different materials for information and pleasure. They stayed informed about the news, were interested in politics, the economy and world events. They read both fiction and non-fiction. Their writing practices tended to be purposeful, like Pete, writing poetry while others talked about specific writing for personal release such as writing a

journal, or memoir and others for getting a job such as writing a resume or writing a legal text such as seen in Andrew's excerpt. Interestingly, Andrew was writing a legal motion for one of his homeless park friends. Andrew also was willing to share his legal knowledge from his reading of *Aspen*, *Georgetown Journal*, and *We the People Primer*.

In response to our first question, our observational data and our researchers' reflections show very clearly and surprisingly to us, that our participants are engaging in numerous literacy activities daily. This finding corroborates what Miller (2011) has found among homeless people that, by and large, they are not illiterate, indeed they are avid readers. What homeless people lack are the resources and the social capital that they need in order to rise above their circumstances.

As researchers, we were thrilled to find these results because 'we did not know these people' and we truly got to know them through talking with them and connecting with them as human beings. One of us wrote about a change in our disposition towards the end of the project:

From the time I was a small child moving to the South, where a newly-made friend informed me that African American children prefer to be called n_ggers (I do not care to spell it or say it) and how I questioned that concept, to my walking hurriedly through the parks when I first began taking classes, since the media portrayal of people in the parks had some sort of hold and effect on my fear of safety, to how comfortable I began feeling walking up to the homeless, neglected members of our society was astounding to me.

Christensen's (2016) revised model of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model, gives prominence to the intra or a person's micro level capacity to "influence their success" in some way (Christensen, 2016, p. 25) or to show their resilience for example. Some of the participants demonstrated an awareness, agency, and resourcefulness to actively seek access to literacies such

as the library resources for leisure, to use the computer, to take computer classes, listen to poetry readings, write a resume or sit and read the newspaper/books or to purposefully get on the computer for utilizing literacy skills and practices to find employment, “I like to get on the computer...I’m searching for a job” or to obtain information “[J]ust look it on, up online and, uh, you know, and you know, information online.” While others adamantly stated their purpose and strategy for the literacy choices they made. For example: “I don’t do the library about twice a month. That’s not really my thing. When I go, I go, I like to go to the research library.”

Participants’ Connections to the Local University and Community Structures

Maria’s Excerpt 4

I: What about the people in the park? How is the University helping the people in the park?

R: {NS- people talking} Well, so ((it’s environmental)) you know, a lot of people are stressed out.

I: Yes.

R: Any kind of hope of happiness that somebody else doin’ somethin’ with their life that’d even bring a little joy. So, you know, it, it helps me to see that, you know, all the things I go through, that there are some people not, that are more fortunate than me, they’re not struggling like me, so, you know, it helps me, challenges me to bring up my goals.

I: Uh, huh

R: which ... you know, to help, help me mentally

I: (Interrupts) Right.

R: you know, don’t forget my main goal is

I: Right.

R: You know, I got to stay on a path like they stayin' on a path.

I: Right, so the University, you think the University helps you with that?

R: ... Well, I say as far as seein' the people and so forth like that, but, as far as

I: The people, what do you mean? The students who are walking through the park?

R: Yea, yea

I: But you personally. How does the University help you personally?

R: It, it doesn't at all.

Maria's excerpt above helps us see how she views the local university and community support for the development of her literacies and future which was the thrust of our second research question. The participants' responses to the university infrastructure and policy were divided. Some were aware of and appreciative of the resources that the university provided, such as the guest visitor Internet access or a "book swap shelf" program, both of which were offered through the university library.

Other participants were more critical. Points of criticism concerned too strict security measures in the library or in the parks near the university, which limited the participants' access to the library or to the parks on the university grounds. One participant did not know what was offered to people who are not enrolled in the university or other types of continuing education and he thought that if the public was informed of literacy offerings, then that could help him personally extend his literacy. This participant explained the nature of this problem "...if the University library were accessible to, to more people... Right now, you see a guy come in with a

bunch of bags on his back, you know, he's hardly going to get, get by security to go in there and read anything."

Ray's Excerpt 5

R: So, I hate that those quality of life laws ... which are just a,.. it..., what it is, these are ordinances, laws that are in effect so that the visitors and tourists of the city and the normal home owners and business owners don't see us. { someone yelling} And I think that's a shame, like I said, especially when you have all of these empty houses. I've seen entire apartment complexes, empty, all boarded up with a fence around it. And that the city and the state government do **nothing** to make the owners sell these houses.

All participants felt the reach of the state and most had very strong words for the state's treatment of them. In the previous excerpt from Ray's transcription he uses words like ordinances and laws to capture the pressures placed upon homeless people by the state. One participant when asked how the city helps him to access information or communicate with others the reply was, "They don't, ...it's like people don't, they don't know, you know like their own job. You know, uh you go to help, you'll go with them and they don't usually, they don't seem like they know what their job is about. You know what I'm sayin?" Still another participant stated, "I think it is a number of things they should consider doing because there is so much that needs to be done... they just looking at the unnecessary things that's just going on." A few of the participants acknowledged the resources available to them in the public libraries and the programs offered in the city to provide temporary shelter for the homeless but by far the majority were very critical of the state's policies and processes for dealing with the homeless. Several participants noted the weaknesses in the approaches to the problem of homelessness. One said,

“First of all, instead of tryin’ to uh, control the problem, they need to start helpin’ the problem...The problem is that there’s no jobs.” The problem for others related strongly to the quality of their lives and the restrictions that they felt the city or state placed upon them. For example, one participant stated it this way, “Well ... the police is one reason and ...they just don’t understand the situation. You can’t be here, you can’t be there.” All participants felt the structures of “containment” and “control” by the laws of the university and the city and enacted by the police as stated in Samuel’s excerpt in our opening excerpt and acknowledged by Ray’s statement on “those quality of life laws.”

Clearly displayed here are Bronfenbrenner’s interdependent meso- and exosystems at work. Along with Coleman’s (1988) social capital theory, it is clear how one’s opportunities for advancement may be impacted by one’s relationships with the university and the state’s structures (mesosystems) or by forces beyond one’s capacity to interact, such as job availability (exosystems). Yet, if one had some type of social capital that allowed opportunities and supports for access to and exchange of resources, one had a way in. Many of our participants did not.

All our participants desire a better quality of life. They had what Christensen (2016) described as the intralevel or the individual micro level characteristics such as resilience that allowed them to live from day to day. They all had strong opinions on the way things were and the way things could be. Our many encounters with them, experiences and observations supported many of their viewpoints. Here is one of our researcher recorded observations:

Today 10 cars pulled over to the curb at different places and times. The people in the cars brought food to the homeless; some brought small amounts (those who drove personal cars) and others brought a lot of food. One group had told me that they had brought 400 lunch bags filled with sandwiches, chips, apples and sweets.

They informed me that they represented a Family Resource Center. This is a group that sang psalms as they distributed the food. They were for the first time in this area. Another group that had brought a lot of food was from a nearby county. They were the members of a local Baptist Church. They had hot soup and small bags with sweet rolls. One other group brought sandwiches and fruit. One of the men seemed to be particularly pleased with having been given the fruit. I heard him say to another person, "I've got some fruit. I don't want to eat junk the whole day."

From our observations, we agreed with our participants who felt that, in general, there was too much outreach for food from the community which was unregulated and did not enable people who were homeless while hurtful laws, policies and regulations limited access to libraries, shelter programs, education courses and resources which could enable them. The participants made specific recommendations for the city and university such as opening the doors to libraries to everyone for a longer period of time; instituting literacy programs leading to securing jobs, being friendlier to the homeless and giving them a second chance. They also want these institutions to recognize their talents and help them capitalize on these talents and skills. They show how the current or existing programs offer only a temporary relief but not what they need the most in terms of their long-term goals of getting a job and somewhere to live. Pete, the poetry writer that we met earlier puts it this way:

Yeah, I think more things should be open.... for people. Because a lot of times I think they don't give people chances to do things. Because a lot of us people, we make mistakes too, but I feel like the city could do a whole lot more with maybe those who can't read and write or maybe they don't understand something and

they can have more organizations open where we could do that. So, I feel like it could be a change in that part.

Many of our participants demonstrated a strong sense of agency, particularly the older men and women. Similar to the findings of Reitzes, Parker, Crimmins, and Ruel (2017) this group had been homeless for a longer period of time and they knew the city, the resources and where to go for help. Many others lacked social capital, did not know anything about the university and did not know where to go to get support from the city. Some also lacked the will to get help and were accepting of their lot in life. This is where we saw and acknowledge the power of the community of the people in the parks. They knew one another and talked and joked with one another, played chess with one another and looked out for the well-being of one another. Many of our conversations and subsequent transcriptions are riddled with the outside talk with other passing homeless people. We saw their great camaraderie and humanity in how they cared for one another. Some revealed their frailties and we came to know some of their health and emotional challenges through the stories that were embedded in their answers to our questions. Tony's excerpt gives us a glimpse into some of his life challenges.

Tony's Excerpt 6

I got involved in AA. I was actually sober for 11 years and with the divorce and my mom passing away, and losing my business within three months. A year later I started drinking again. But you know I've had periods of sobriety. You know a year here and two years there. Then I would go back out and drink again. For a short period...of course that's not good for me. Through doing that I realize that is not what I wanna do. I get depressed and things going on and with the economy work...there is work out there. I've been working for myself for the past ten

years....past 11 years. They had a lot of work you know but I actually got to where I couldn't work. I realized the last job I did that I ...it just hurt me so bad. I'm trying to finish it. Then having health, it messed me around on my work. I do quality work you know. There was a time when I had crews that I trust. It's got to where people don't care about nothing...they have no pride in their work. They don't wanna do quality work and that's not me.

Above all, people who are homeless want to be regarded as worthy humans visible to other people in concrete ways and deserving of a second chance. They want to talk and to be understood as people. Maria, whom we met earlier states it this way, "...a lot of people don't sit down and talk about stuff like this; they just always walking past and I think this is more important than anything, ...somebody need to hear that because that's something new."

Where are We Going with this Work?

One of our participants told us that "no one wants to be homeless" and another, "they need to do some more research and study, you know, because all the homeless people, everybody have different problem. Well, you know, not all homeless the same." While our findings identified the participants varied and ranging literacy engagements and awareness of the institutional supports offered by the state capital and the university, the majority feel disenfranchised, ignored and unacknowledged by the lack of connections with the people in the university and state capital. We heard participants state, "I don't go to the university," or "I don't know if I have access" when speaking of using the library. They feel and see the closures around them by the police (Samuel, Maria and Ray's excerpts) but most of all they feel the power of being ignored or deemed nonexistent and they want to be known. We contend that they deserve

to be known so that opportunities can be provided to develop their talents (Pete and Andrew's excerpts) and improve their quality of life (Tony's excerpt).

Lee (2012) suggests that our misconceptions inform how we evaluate disenfranchised people such as the people in the parks. He states, "At the same time, there remain many unanswered questions and what I deem to be misconceptions that impact how we evaluate groups of people, including how we understand the geopolitical spaces they occupy" (p. 173). We certainly do not assume to understand all the challenges that face people who are without homes but many of our own misconceptions have been upended by our six months of spending time in the parks talking with them. We now have their personal counter stories. We have incorporated the counter stories of the homeless into our mindsets, our teaching and lives.

This work has propelled us to take our teacher education classes into the parks not to "help" those who are homeless but to learn from them and to exchange viewpoints through conversations as a first step to reducing the distance between "us" and "them." Two summers ago, the students in a doctoral class on *International Perspectives on Teacher Education* and another pre-service master's level *Intercultural Class* had to go into the parks and in pairs talk with the homeless people who were there. Students had to find out what the people in the park were reading and then had to read an excerpt from any one of our course texts and solicit the opinion of the respondent. Follow-up discussions with the students and their reflections reveal the transformations in their thinking that such kinds of scaffolded interactions can bring about. The past two summers we also presented this work to K-12 classroom teachers and teacher education university professors and researchers at international, national and local conferences. In all cases, our participants have been amazed by the resources of the people in the parks. Imagine if more of us could see what they are capable of and work to provide the understandings

and support they need to realize their dreams through an appreciation of their counter stories?

We continue this research by having follow-up in-depth conversations with some of our participants who have been in the city and homeless for more than eight-ten years to get a deeper understanding of their life's challenges. We close by making the following recommendations on behalf of the people in the parks for enhancing at the personal (micro) level their social capital and self-esteem and by reducing the university and city's distance and strengthening the interconnections between the local community (mesosystems) and wider societal (exo)systems that may work against them:

- Develop brochures, handouts, or newsletters informing people in the parks of literacy engagement opportunities at the university and in the city;
- Create forums in the parks for brainstorming and developing action plans with people who are homeless to examine and address the issues confronting the opportunities for advancement;
- Create opportunities for collaboration between the city and the university to work together to address the recommendation of the people in the parks and enact policies that will respond to their concerns;
- Create opportunities for students and professors in the university and people in the city to encounter the people in the parks to bridge the distance between us and create common understanding and mutual respect and supports.

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