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Peter M. Miller

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Homeless Families’ Education Networks: An Examination of Access and Mobilization

Peter M. Miller¹

Abstract

Purpose: This study sought deeper understanding of how sheltered families accessed and mobilized educationally related relationships and resources during periods of homelessness. Such work is posited to be especially relevant considering that there is a growing crisis of family homelessness in the United States and school- and community-based leaders need to develop more nuanced understandings of how to meet their needs. Research Design: The study was situated in a large urban region in the eastern United States, and data were collected through surveys of 151 sheltered homeless mothers, focus group interviews with 51 homeless mothers, and analysis of a countywide homeless management information system. Data analysis was informed by Lin’s network theory of social capital, which, among other relational issues, purposefully considers embedded resources, resource accessibility, and resource mobilization. Findings: The findings revealed several significant obstacles to homeless families’ access to and mobilization of network relationships and resources. Amid these challenges, however, the leaders and structures of residential homeless serving agencies appear to play key roles in helping families develop new opportunities. Conclusions: It is suggested

¹University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Peter M. Miller, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis, 1000 Bascom Mall, Madison, WI 53706
Email: pmmiller2@wisc.edu
that shelters develop programs and philosophies of action that are consonant with their service capacities and locations. Furthermore, shelter, school, and community leaders are urged to construct systems of collaborative understanding and practice. Finally, several suggestions for future research are presented.

Keywords
homelessness, leadership, social capital, collaboration, community

Introduction and Literature Review

The rapid escalation of homelessness in the United States in the past 2 years has directly affected thousands of school-age children (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). These children are forced to live in difficult, highly mobile, and often dangerous conditions, and their lives are littered with potentially debilitating problems. It is not surprising, then, that homeless children tend to struggle in school (Miller, 2008a, 2009a). The complex and pervasive issues of violence, illness, addiction, debt, and detachment that accompany these children and their families require multilevel support and intervention from a host of individuals and institutions, and although countless school- and community-based professionals are committed to such action, there are few, if any, broadly accepted ways for going about it. The education literature, for example, is replete with articles and empirical studies that address issues such as student achievement, psychosocial development, behavioral tendencies, and legal protocol in contexts of homelessness but is mostly devoid of empirical work that examines how larger systems of practice are put to use by families who are experiencing homelessness. Such gaps are especially notable in the educational leadership literature. Accordingly, there is a need for better understandings among school- and community-based leaders of how effective multilevel support and intervention might unfold in contexts of homelessness. This study sought to help build these better understandings by learning how homeless families access and mobilize educational resources and relationships in one large urban region.

The Homeless Crisis in the United States

The homeless problem in the United States—which is tied to factors such as shortages of affordable housing, inaccessibility of just-paying jobs, and micro- and macro-level relational breakdowns—is significant, and it appears to have
escalated considerably in recent years. Although it is highly difficult to count the numbers of homeless individuals at any given time, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2007) estimated that 3.5 million people experience homelessness in a given year and, startlingly, 1.35 million of them are children. These numbers are likely much higher in 2010, as the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) noted “dramatic increases” of shelter usage and the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2008) reported widespread increases of individual and family homelessness in cities across the country. Not surprisingly, the economic recession in the United States and beyond has contributed to these increases. A National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) report explained, “Since 2007, advocacy organizations working to end homelessness have watched with concern as a series of crises have gathered into another perfect economic storm resulting in an unprecedented growth in the number of individuals and families left without homes” (p. 2).

Schools across the country have witnessed the proliferation of school-age homeless children from close vantage points. Duffield and Lovell’s (2008) survey of school districts’ homeless liaisons (positions that are mandated by the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act) revealed a series of unsettling findings:

- 330 school districts identified the same number or more homeless students in the first few months of the 2008–2009 school year than they identified the entire previous year
- 847 school districts identified half or more of the 2007–2008 academic year’s case load in the first few months of the 2008–2009 school year
- 459 school districts had an increase of at least 25% in the number of homeless students identified between the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 school years

The larger homeless crisis, then, is also an education crisis, for thousands of students—and the schools they attend—are deeply affected (Gewirtz, Hart-Shegos, & Medhanie, 2008).

**Homelessness and Education**

The many problems documented among children experiencing homelessness—such as mental health problems (Buckner & Bassuk, 1999; Huntington, Buckner, & Bassuk, 2008; Masten, Sesma, & Si-Asar, 1997), social and emotional behavior issues (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Helfrich & Beer, 2007), social isolation
and rejection (Anooshian, 2003, 2005; Kennedy, 2007), malnutrition (Helfrich & Beer, 2007), high mobility rates (Stronge, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 2000), and chronic illness (Helfrich & Beer, 2007)—are likely related to the widespread struggles that they experience in school. For example, research suggests that many of these students have academic achievement difficulties (Barwick & Siegel, 1996; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Masten et al., 1997; Obradović et al., 2009; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; Zima, Bussing, Forness, & Benjamin, 1997), poor school attendance records (Stronge, 2000), elevated school transfer rates (Taylor & Adelman, 2000), high rates of disability identification, school dropout, and violent behavior (Bowman & Barksdale, 2004; Lively & Kleine, 1996; Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000), and greater likelihood of grade retention (Tucker, 1999).

School districts engage the homeless education issue with widely varied methods, policies, and structures. Although some districts, such as the Minneapolis Public Schools, have developed multifaceted programs aimed at serving the complex needs of homeless students and families (refer to http://policy.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/5291A.pdf for details about Minneapolis Public Schools programming), many others have few formal support structures in place (Miller, 2009a). All districts, regardless of size, location, or demographic characteristics, however, are required by the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act to afford homeless students certain opportunities and rights. Specifically, the McKinney–Vento Act advocates for students who are homeless by (a) specifically detailing which students are eligible for homeless services, (b) increasing students’ school choice options during mobile periods of their lives, (c) mandating that schools must immediately enroll and provide services for students who are homeless, and (d) creating supportive infrastructures for students and their families. Therefore, although the extent to which districts implement McKinney–Vento mandates fluctuates (Miller, 2009b), it is a crucial element of the homeless education situation in the United States in that it outlines a foundational set of operating principles that are to guide school leaders in their work with students experiencing homelessness.

Other Programs and Structures

Although schools obviously play key roles in attempts to help students who are homeless—and, as indicated by the research cited here, are facing great struggles in these roles—the complex nature of homeless situations ensures that other individuals and institutions also join the effort. Notably, the roles of residential homeless serving agencies (RHSAs) in supporting families’
educational pursuits appear to be especially vital. Well-conceived, long-term RHSAs have demonstrated capacities to increase students’ academic motivation (Mickelson & Yon, 1995) and homework completion rates (Miller, 2008a, 2008b) and also to improve students’ school behavior (Nabors et al., 2003). In addition, RHSAs commonly provide families with valuable child care, after-school, and various other supportive programs that appear to bolster families’ wider chances for achieving educational stability and success (Miller, 2008a, 2009b).

Along with RHSAs, countless other community-based educational services such as Head Start programs and after-school academic programs appear to have potential for filling important gaps in students’ social and cognitive development during periods of homelessness (Miller, 2008b). There is overwhelming support in the education literature that such outside of school educational programming can be a positive asset for children and communities—especially those who are from low-income and/or highly mobile backgrounds (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Hirsch, 2005; Marshall, Burnam, Koegel, & Sullivan-Greer, 1996; Posner & Vandell, 1999). As these school, RHSA, and community-based programs make both individual and collective efforts, however, it is unclear how they are perceived and actually utilized by families who are homeless. Are their structures and services reflective of their constituents’ needs? Are these structures and services understood by those who they purport to serve? Do educational entities have room for collaborative improvement? Are these services tied to or dependent on certain relationships? These are questions that this study sought to address in Center-ville, a large urban region in the eastern United States.1 Specifically, the guiding research questions for the study were the following: (a) How do families access and mobilize resources and relationships in Centerville’s larger education network during periods of homelessness? and (b) What factors facilitate or inhibit this access and mobilization?

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical insights were gained from Lin’s (1999) network theory of social capital. Describing social capital as “investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns” (p. 34), Lin’s model is situated within an array of other theories of social capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995) that have been used effectively in the field of education to examine students’ and families’ environments, expectations, opportunities, and achievements (e.g., Miller, 2008b; Goddard, 2003; Greeley, 1997; Lee & Croninger, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Broadly summarized,
this research tends to suggest that certain kinds of social capital can facilitate productive educational experiences for students, families, and/or communities. Accordingly, although many students who experience homelessness are faced with wide-ranging social, emotional, physical, and/or financial dilemmas—and their challenges will not be altogether “fixed” by learning more about their productive social connections—it is evident that matters pertaining to personal and professional relationships and social capital are indeed highly relevant to their academic success and merit investigation.

Although the seminal social capital work of Coleman (1988) provides useful insights into how relationships can facilitate social norming and social closure and Bourdieu’s (1985) equally influential work highlights how matters of power and privilege can be attached and/or revealed in social relationships, Lin’s (1999, 2000) social capital work is especially useful for this study of homeless parents from diverse backgrounds because it considers how social capital utility is tied to issues of network heterogeneity and institutional attachment. Lin claims that these matters are often noteworthy when considering individuals from nondominant backgrounds because they tend to have social capital networks that are homogeneous (they know mostly people who are like themselves), limited in range (they do not know many “highly ranked” people), and institutionally unattached (they do not have meaningful roles or affiliations with resourceful groups or organizations). Lin describes these as issues of “social capital inequality,” describing how women, African Americans, and the poor tend to have relational networks that are not very far-reaching or diverse. They often rely on family and kin networks—networks that are helpful in many ways but can also limit upward mobility because they often lack “bridges” or “structural holes” to new personal, professional, and/or educational opportunities.

Lin’s discussion of relationship networks as they relate to embedded resources, accessibility, and mobilization provided specific guidance to my analysis of data and presentation of findings. Social capital is framed as constituting intersecting elements of structure (resource embeddedness), opportunity (resource accessibility), and action (resource use). Specifically, guided by Lin’s framework, I examined how agency-based homeless families in Centerville gained access to and mobilized resources and relationships in the region’s larger homeless education network. This network is conceptualized as consisting of families, schools, RHSAs, and other community-based educational resources (such as after-school programs and day care centers). Particular attention was paid to relationships and resources that were institutionally attached (people and opportunities that were connected with schools, RHSAs, and other organizations) because Lin and others have referred to these as the
most promising of relationships and resources for making life improvements. After describing some key educational resources that are embedded in the broader Centerville homeless education network, I examine families’ access to and purposive mobilization of elements of the network.

Related to these foci, another element of Lin’s social capital theory that guided my inquiry and analysis pertains to the discussion of network density and closure. Some social capital theorists (most notably Coleman, 1988) suggest that networks are most useful and productive when they consist of dense, tightly knit relationships where sociobehavioral trust, norms, and expectations can be established. Such networks are often referred to as “closed networks” (Coleman, 1988) and are depicted as desirable in that they facilitate information sharing and mutual support. Others, however, suggest that relational bridges, “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973), and/or “structural holes” (Burt, 1992) in networks are more productive in that they can provide individuals with access to new resources and opportunities that are unavailable in closed networks. Lin (1999) offers helpful insight into this discussion by suggesting that the efficacy of network composition (i.e., dense, closed networks or open, bridging networks) is dependent on what individuals seek to gain from their networks. For those who wish to preserve their existing resources and/or statuses—such as wealth, security, and/or social positions—densely constituted, closed networks are often most advantageous. On the other hand, those who seek what Lin (1999, p. 34) refers to as “instrumental action”—that which is directed toward the accrual of new resources or relationships—might benefit more from more open and diverse bridging networks. Accordingly, as I examine the resource embeddedness, accessibility, and mobilization of education networks, I concurrently consider the particular ends that families seek and how the density and/or openness of their networks facilitate them reaching these ends.

**Research Setting**

I examined homeless families’ access to and mobilization of institutionally attached resources and relationships that were situated in schools, RHSAs, and other child-serving community-based organizations. A brief overview of each of these elements of Centerville’s homeless education network is given next.

**Schools**

There are 43 school districts and almost 250 schools in Centerville County that offer a vast array of educational programs and services to families in the
area. Most of them provide after-school programming for students and various family supports in addition to the student supervision and instruction that occur during the regular school day. The schools in Centerville, like schools throughout the United States, are staffed with teachers, administrators, and support staff who work with students for many hours. In that these schools are central bases of learning and growth for most children in the Centerville area and they are equipped with wide-ranging resources, these are pivotal points of contact for parents as they seek to help their children have stable and successful school experiences—particularly during times of homelessness.

**RHSAs**

The 20 RHSAs from which I gathered data varied greatly in mission, size, and infrastructure, but at the very least, as family-serving agencies, they each attempt to provide safe spaces where mothers and children can stay during times of extreme duress and instability. Most of the agencies have case managers, child development specialists, and/or other staff to help families engage pressing issues relating to addiction, abuse, financial crisis, illness, and education—many of which tend to be interrelated. Thanks to the fund-raising efforts of a local foundation, 18 of the RHSAs have youth learning centers and/or resource libraries that are specifically designed to support students’ academic needs. All of the learning centers are staffed with up to four full-time employees and also offer volunteer tutors, multiple computers, advanced online learning software, and an assortment of other assistive learning tools. These centers are families’ short- and/or long-term places of residence, and thus the relationships that mothers make with staff and other mothers at RHSAs are undoubtedly important ones that can reap diverse benefits.

**Community-Based Programs**

Centerville is teeming with youth serving and educational organizations, programs, and opportunities for families. For example, using community resource inventory software, I identified 1,191 after-school youth programs in the area (some organizations host multiple programs) and 1,295 day care programs. The educational programs are wide-ranging in scope and purpose. Although some are directed toward science, math, reading, writing, and/or other specific academic areas, others offer more general homework help or tutoring. Also included are an array of programs in the arts, recreation, social support, and the like. There is a particularly dense concentration of these programs in the central city area of Centerville. Like schools and RHSAs, these venues appear to be attractive spaces for families to forge resource-rich relationships.
Method

This findings presented here are part of a larger mixed-method investigation of homeless education in Centerville. A total of 151 homeless mothers from 20 (previously described) RHSAs were surveyed as part of the wide-ranging study. In this particular examination of homeless families’ access to and mobilization of local education networks, I drew most substantially from focus group data that I collected at seven RHSAs over a 5-month stretch. To gather representative focus group data, I purposefully included both short- and long-term agencies and made sure to select agencies that had diverse foci (domestic violence, addiction, physical or mental health, etc.). The RHSAs at which focus group interviews were held were those that had the largest populations of mothers with school-age children—which was crucial because of my desire to collect data using focus groups (some of the other RHSAs did not have enough mothers in residence to hold focus groups). Regarding the qualitative data collection, I deliberated whether to use focus groups or interviews, and, with insights from RHSA leaders, I ultimately decided that focus groups would increase the homeless mothers’ comfort levels. Although this researcher–participant comfort was essential, the use of focus groups instead of interviews certainly limited the extent to which I could follow up some individuals’ comments with more probing questions. In addition, although the participants disclosed matters that were seemingly quite personal in nature, many of the participants were probably reticent to share some of the more intimate details about their educational experiences in the focus group settings.

The semistructured (Creswell, 1998) sessions averaged between 4 and 5 participants each and were from 45 minutes to 90 minutes in length. There were 12 focus groups involving 51 mothers of school-age children, including multiple sessions at several agencies. After I had gathered county, university, and RHSA consent, participants were notified about the focus groups by staff members at the RHSAs (all of whom I had previously spoken with about the study). I also met several times with the Centerville County administrator who oversees the homeless programs to be sure he was aware of the study procedures. All of the mothers who consented to take part in the focus groups ultimately did so on a volunteer basis, and those who chose not to participate experienced no repercussions of any kind. I did not collect extensive personal information about the individual participants (number of times homeless, grade levels of their children, names of their schools, etc.), but data provided by the County’s Homeless Management and Information System (HMIS) indicated that 70% of the clients in the focus group settings were experiencing their first episodes of homelessness and 76% of them had experienced no more than one episode of homelessness in the past 3 years. With the exception
of a few mothers whose children were in high school, almost all of the mothers described their children as being enrolled in grades eight and lower—mostly at the schools that were in closest proximity to the RHSAs at which they resided. Based on agency administrators’ feedback and Metro County data, which identify the total number of recipients of county services, more than 85% of the mothers who were invited to participate in the focus groups took part in the study. The only mothers who ultimately chose not to participate were those who had other obligations, such as work, and, in a couple instances, mothers who were sick. To protect participants’ identities, I used pseudonyms for the larger urban region and all of the 20 RHSAs, and I did not use any of the mothers’ names in the study.

The focus groups were guided by broad questions and conversational cues that I provided. These cues were intended to encourage participants to speak about their families’ experiences with schooling and education during their times of homelessness—particularly as they related to their access to and mobilization of institutional elements of the homeless education network. Some examples of the cues that were used include the following:

- How have the relationships in your life affected your ability to learn about and use helpful programs at school and other community places?
- What education-related programs have helped you and your children most? How did you find out about them?
- Are there certain obstacles in your family’s life that make it difficult to take full advantage of education programs and resources in the community? Please explain.
- What (or who) has helped you and your family most in getting connected with helpful educational programs and services? Please explain.

Such discussion cues were helpful in keeping the conversations relevant to the research questions, but per semistructured interview protocol, I purposefully designed the sessions to be flexible. When mothers had particularly rich stories that they wanted to share, I encouraged them to do so—even if the stories did not provide direct answers to the discussion prompts. Such flexibility contributed to the conversations unfolding as authentic, free-flowing interactions rather than rigid question–answer sessions.

In addition to the qualitative focus group data, the findings were bolstered with the inclusion of some of the larger study’s relevant survey data as well as data from Centerville’s robust HMIS, which documents every time an individual uses any of the county’s broad array of human and social services.
In addition, I used Centerville County mapping and resource identification software to track resource location and availability. Together, the multiple sources of data—focus groups, surveys, HMIS, and tracking software—helped increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Miller & Hafner, 2008c; Miller, 2008d).

It should be noted that this inquiry is descriptive in nature and not intended to produce findings that can be broadly generalized to other urban homeless education contexts. Rather, the rich description of issues relating to families’ access to and mobilization of the Centerville network can provide insights that might prove helpful to researchers and leaders in other settings. Also, considering that much of the literature on education in contexts of homelessness is school centric—that is, schools and school actors are the primary units of analysis—I attempt to provide a novel contribution by focusing predominantly on families and RHSAs.

The focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. To analyze the data, I began with an inductive, open coding process that allowed me to identify emergent themes (refer to Figure 1 for an example of this process). Although the reflexive nature of qualitative research accepts that my position as researcher influences the process, this thorough open coding process allowed themes that were truly reflective of the participants’ responses to emerge from the data. Next, to learn about the relationships between these major emergent themes, an axial coding process was utilized. Specifically, I used the processes described by Huberman and Miles (1998) that included clustering themes into “conceptual groupings” and “making conceptual/theoretical coherence” (p. 205). After the focus group data were open and axial coded and emergent themes were identified and relationally described, they were examined in relation to key survey and HMIS findings. Elements of Lin’s (1999, 2000) network theory of social capital were then used as organizing principles. Finally, although the highly mobile nature of families made it impossible to use member checks with all of the participants, I shared the focus group protocol and emergent themes of the findings with two academic colleagues and the aforementioned county administrator to support their general logic and appropriate direction.

Findings

In reading the findings—which focus on numerous barriers to families’ accessing and mobilizing of network resources as well as the particular benefits derived from RHSA linkages—an important consideration is the particular way that I frame the terms access and mobilization. These are central elements
of Lin’s (1999) network theory, and in this research context, I refer to families’ access to resources and relationships as being tied to families’ knowledge of them (they must know that the resources exist and, broadly, what they entail) as well as families’ perceptions and understandings of the resources and relationships as being available to them. I refer to mobilization of these resources and relationships as the actual use of them. That is, a family might know about
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a program and understand that the program is one for which they are eligible, but unless they actually use that program, they are not mobilizing it.

Limiting Access to Relationships and Resources

The factors that I heard mothers describe most commonly and emphatically as being limiting factors to their access and mobilization of schools, RHSAs, and other community-based education resources were their broken personal relationships, the general duress of homelessness, inefficient information dissemination, and location and transportation problems. Each of these is described next.

Families’ personal relationships as barriers to network access. Although their particular situations varied widely in terms of their types of personal issues, their duration without housing, and so on, the mothers in the study found common ground in that most of them appeared to have few productive relationships in their lives (other than those with their children) prior to their periods of residency at their RHSAs. The qualitative focus group findings were particularly rich here. When I asked parents about the relationships that affected their kids’ educational experiences, I anticipated that parents would reiterate some of the difficulties that they had with teachers and schools, and although I did hear a number of such stories, I also heard about some of the deeply troubling circumstances that contributed to their families becoming homeless. Many of these stories centered on how abusive relationships violated their kids and exposed them to violence and lives of fear:

I was living in fear of him [her husband]. We were running from him and to hear that he had died, it was just a relief.

My daughter was molested by her dad. And my son witnessed him with a gun to my head. He actually pulled the trigger but the bullet got stuck in the chamber. He [her son] saw it all.

When it comes to domestic violence, so much of the attention is devoted to the women and mothers and not really toward the children. But the children suffer just like the adult does—especially if they’re witnesses to it. I left my husband when my daughter was 2—she’s 7 now and still remembers some of the things she saw.

Considering the prevalence of such stories, it was not surprising, then, that when I asked mothers with whom they had productive personal relationships
(in contexts of schooling), most of them struggled to come up with answers. One mother, for example, said, “I don’t really have anybody like that. I don’t have much family and the ones I have aren’t worth much. I guess I’d like to get them [her kids] into the Big Brother program or something like that.” Another offered, “I don’t really have family around here so I have to reach out.”

It was interesting to note that even though their personal networks were broken, many mothers chose to stay in doubled-up situations with family or friends prior to coming to an RHSA. Centerville County data, for example, indicated that in 2008–2009, 34% of those who entered the 20 RHSAs I studied had previously been doubled up with extended family or friends. In fact, at one RHSA, all of the 14 mothers with whom I spoke had been doubled up with family or friends at some point in the past couple of years. Not surprisingly, these situations were described as being difficult in that they were often unstable and dangerous and forced the mothers and their kids to change their normal routines and ways of living. One mother, for instance, recalled, “You have to live by the way they run their house.” These daily life adjustments, however, were often framed as being less consequential than the other common problem that was noted—that doubled-up conditions make positive life progress (educational, professional, behavioral, etc.) difficult to achieve. Surrounded by unhealthy relationships, mothers said it was difficult to access people and resources that could help them. Doubled-up conditions left them stranded in the status quo. One mother, for example, said, “You wind up being in this rut,” and another one exclaimed, “It’s almost sabotage. I take a step forward and they’re [family] wacking me back.” These statements supported Rumbaut’s (1997) assertion that “family ties bind, but sometimes these bonds constrain rather than facilitate particular outcomes” (p. 39). So it was quite apparent that many homeless families’ personal networks were unhelpful in that they did not engender access to resources or relationships (particularly in schools and community-based organizations) that could help them make much-needed life strides.

The duress of homelessness as a barrier to network access. Another broadly construed limiter to network access and mobilization was what I refer to as the duress of homelessness. Specifically, many of the mothers with whom I spoke were overwhelmed by the crises in their lives and, as a result, often lacked the time or energy to make connections with elements of the local homeless education network. Mothers spoke of pressures related to finding housing, dealing with addictions, overcoming physical and mental health problems, digging out of financial holes, securing child care, and numerous other issues. During one of the focus group sessions, I asked the mothers what
kinds of challenges limit them on a daily basis, and one of them responded, “Do you really want me to answer that? Because I’ve got many, many problems.” She then expounded on her “homeless duress” by detailing her numerous struggles. Her statements were consistent with those made by many others, such as the mother who said it was difficult to invest in relationships that would benefit her children’s education because “I’ve got my own issues to attend to” and another who summarized her first month of homelessness by saying, “It’s been hell.”

The numerous difficulties and daily tasks that limited many of the homeless mothers with whom I spoke were intertwined with substantial emotional and psychological strife. Some of them seemed to be paralyzed by guilt, fear, and uncertainty. Others described being bogged down by frustration and anger—including frustration and anger with school personnel who were perceived to be unjust and/or indifferent. One mother, for instance, was upset that her daughter’s school did not care that the girl was both homeless and seriously ill: “I am really disturbed. . . . And being that we’re in the shelter, they should try to be understanding. . . . They don’t seem to give a damn at all.” Such emotional and psychological issues, along with the daily physical and task-related struggles associated with homelessness, clearly debilitated access and mobilization of network relationships and resources—especially school-based ones.

**Ineffective information flow as a barrier to network access.** A third factor that appeared to limit families’ capacities to fully access institutionally attached relationships and resources was inefficient information flow. In gaining access to schools, legal information shortages were noted several times as short-term barriers to children’s enrollment school (survey data indicated that only 20% of mothers knew very much about children’s education rights as spelled out by the McKinney–Vento Act), and “procedural information shortages” were cited by several mothers and school leaders as being barriers to efficient parent–school engagement. Specifically, they claimed that mothers did not “understand the system” or know whom to contact within the district when they had a particular need or concern.

Information problems were most commonly noted as they pertained to accessing community-based services. Interestingly, mothers mentioned both “too much” and “not enough” information as being problematic here. Several of them recalled that when they were first forced to navigate the Centerville County social service system as homeless women, they were overwhelmed by massive amounts of information online and in books, brochures, and packets. It was a daunting task for them to try to figure out paths to short-term
residential haven, let alone educational programming for their children. One of the mothers, for example, said, “It’s so depressing looking at the whole packets they give you. It’s way too much.”

On the “not enough information” side, numerous mothers suggested that various personnel throughout the system, including some RHSA staff members and others from community service agencies, were inept when it came to spreading news about relevant educational and social services. Representative of their sentiments here was one mother’s statement that “everything’s a secret. You don’t even realize the things that are available because nobody tells you” and another’s assertion that “especially when you go to the welfare office, they don’t tell you anything that’s available to help you. If you don’t already know, you’re not going to find out about it.”

Not surprisingly, then, the survey findings included the following:

- Of mothers, 64% claimed that lack of knowledge about community programming was the biggest barrier to the fuller involvement of their children in local programming
- Of staff members, 57% said that lack of information was a barrier to families becoming more fully involved in community programming

Finally, making similar statements as those listed above, several mothers mentioned that insufficient information and misperceptions also served as barriers to their seeking and ultimately gaining access to RHSAs. For example, one mother said,

They’re a secret [community programs]. The reason I stayed in my [abusive] relationship so long was that I had no idea what a shelter had to offer. My vision of a shelter was a big room with a bunch of bunks. I was horrified.

All of these information-related problems in the social service domain appeared relevant to the education discussion because without their families securing proper shelter and personal and social services, children’s capacities to thrive educationally were significantly diminished.

**Location and transportation as barriers to network access.** Earlier, I noted that there is a broad array of youth-focused community programs in Centerville (1,191 after-school programs and 1,295 day care programs), programs that would be considered vital elements of the homeless education network. However, even when they gained information about some of these opportunities for their kids, many of the mothers with whom I spoke found it difficult,
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if not impossible, to get transportation arrangements made so their kids could take part in the programs. Part of the problem here appeared to be the physical distance between their RHSAs and the community-based programs, for although the larger Centerville area has 1,191 and 1,295 after-school and day care programs, respectively, there is much greater programmatic density in some neighborhoods than in others. I used county mapping software to determine how many day care programs and education-focused after-school programs were located within 1-, 3-, and 5-mile proximities of four particular RHSAs: Soul Place, which is located in the Clearview neighborhood and provides transitional and long-term housing and programs; Happiness, which is located in the Rollins neighborhood and provides a range of short- and long-term housing programs; Women’s Care & Support, which is located in Sunnyvale and provides short-term shelter and services for homeless domestic violence victims; and Womencenter, which is located in Highland and provides emergency shelter and transitional housing. Although I expected there to be variance in the number of community-based programs in each of these RHSA’s neighborhoods, I was highly surprised at the extent of the variance. For example, although there were 48, 303, and 512 after-school education programs located within 1-, 3-, and 5-mile radiuses of the inner-city based Womencenter, there were only 3, 7, and 28 programs located within similar ranges of the Clearview-based Soul Place, which is located 12 miles south of downtown. As seen in Table 1 and Figures 2–5, there is a significant difference in programmatic density at the other locations as well.

In addition to the variance in proximities to after-school programs, I found there to be similar differences in regard to day care locations (refer to Table 2). Day care centers are not typically classified as “education” programs, but for the mothers with whom I spoke, they were a highly important element of families’ education pursuits. They allowed mothers to pursue their own pressing educational, professional, and developmental needs and become more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Programs within 1 mile</th>
<th>Programs within 3 miles</th>
<th>Programs within 5 miles</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>417</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rollins</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunnyvale</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>649</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Community-Based Educational Programs in Proximity to Selected Centerville Residential Homeless Serving Agencies
involved with older children’s schooling efforts, and importantly, they provided a safe place for children to interact with other children and caring adults. Although many people may not perceive programs that are beyond a few miles away to be inaccessible, navigating such distances tended to be very
difficult for the homeless families with whom I spoke—most of whom relied on walking and buses to get around town. In fact, mothers emphasized the seriousness of transportation struggles in just about every focus group conversation. Some of their representative quotes included,
It’s really hard when you don’t have people who can drive you around. . . . In my field there are not a lot of jobs on the bus line. Most of them are like 30 minutes off the bus line.

My son used to go to the Boys and Girls Club after school, but I had a car then and I don’t now, so he can’t go anymore.

Even going to the grocery store can be like, “How am I going to carry all of that back?” I’ve got two boys tagging along. I’ve worked out a system where this poor stroller is going to give way. I’ve had 13 bags hanging from the stroller! It’s so challenging when you don’t have that vehicle to help you do what you want to do. Especially when you’re trying to do the right thing and succeed and not be on welfare programs.

I used the Centerville County Public Transportation website to determine how long it would take bus passengers to get from each of the four RHSAs to downtown Centerville, where there is greatest density of family programs. Womencenter is located in downtown, so its residents could navigate numerous programs by walking or taking very brief bus rides. However, as seen in Table 3, a bus ride from the other RHSAs required substantial time investments—including a whopping 107 minutes (including two transfers and associated wait times) from Soul Place to downtown. Such trips appeared to be nearly impossible for mothers with busy lives and multiple children to care for.

Although transportation problems clearly limited families’ access and mobilization of community-based network relationships and resources, it was also noted several times as limiting school engagement. Some mothers chose to leave their children enrolled in their schools of origin, for instance (instead of the schools nearest to their RHSAs), and as a result, they had long bus rides to and from school and mothers had a difficult time getting to the school if they needed to speak with teachers or other staff members.
Overall implications of access limiters. The network access inhibiting factors that were described here—lack of productive relationships, homeless duress, inefficient information dissemination, and location or transportation problems—were not the only factors that affected homeless families in the area, but they were the most frequently noted ones. The most striking aspect of these “access blockers” was their snowballing impact on school-based experiences. Even when broken relationships, homeless duress, inefficient information dissemination, and transportation problems did not directly affect families’ access to and mobilization of school-based relationships and resources, their deleterious impact on families’ wider life conditions seemed to create instability and conflict that made positive school-based interactions and relationships difficult to come by.

Facilitating Access and Mobilization

One of the clearest and most strongly supported findings from the overall study was that RHSAs can often help families overcome the aforementioned limiters to network access and become actively engaged with potentially beneficial resources and relationships. I asked every mother, “What has helped you make connections with useful educational relationships and resources in the area?” and most of them mentioned some aspect(s) or benefit(s) of the RHSA at which they were staying. By accessing and mobilizing relationships and resources at their RHSAs, families were able to both stabilize their lives and make strides in promising new directions. Below, I provide an overview of the most common RHSA factors that facilitate productive action and describe how they are intertwined with some key issues of intended network purposes and long-term sustainability.

Safety and Stability at RHSAs. Particularly at the longer-term sites where families could stay for 3 months or more, numerous mothers mentioned that their RHSAs were of fundamental value in providing them with safety, stability,
and freedom that allowed them to access and mobilize educational resources. They were able to get away from conflict-ridden and/or abusive relationships and gain access to much needed personal services that could help them to “gather themselves.” Some of their comments included,

Here, I’ve found a lot more freedom to do things with my kids and learn to be a good mom.

I think the independence of this program helps you experiment with things on your own without someone saying, “Well, you shouldn’t do that.” The consequences are on you. It’s a learning experience.

There might be some tough days where everything seems over your head, but even those bad days are still good days because we’ve got a roof over our heads and we’re making progress forward. We don’t have the chaos in our lives. There’s an overall peace that allows us to step back and take a look at ourselves.

By accessing and mobilizing RHSAs as their reliable home bases, mothers appeared to be poised to make additional resourceful connections.

**Bonding Relationships at RHSAs.** The relationships between homeless mothers who lived at the same agencies varied greatly, but I noted that many mothers at the longer-term agencies appeared to rely on each other for friendship and day-to-day support. These interfamily bonds appeared to be vital in helping them get through the daily struggles of homelessness—including education struggles. One mother at Soul Place described,

We are like a family. There are 27 families here and we are a family. There are of course problems with people not getting along from time to time, but it’s just like that. Everybody seems to have that one person or two people that they just grow on. . . . We need someone to fall back on. For me that’s been Ramona [pseudonym for her friend]. Her family and my family have become one. Her kids play with my kids and mine with hers. We have dinner together, cook together, and take care of each other. Where she’s lacking I am, and where I’m lacking she is. We pick each other up. And that happens with other relationships throughout this program. . . . I am estranged from my biological family, so I’ve adopted this one.

These bonds between mothers and their families were purposefully fostered at most of the longer-term RHSAs through weekly or monthly meetings or
social gatherings. Although many of them had busy schedules and were hard-pressed to find any free time, the mothers seemed to appreciate the relational opportunities presented by these meetings. A mother from Happiness said,

I like the Monday night meetings because a lot of us have schooling and other things so, being that this is mandatory and we have to be here, it just gives us a chance to see each other and to talk and share and relate. And it helps us build our relationships with one another. They even provide day care during the meetings so our kids aren’t around during the meetings so we can get to talk with each other even better.

I attended and observed a number of “Monday night meetings” at RHSAs in Centerville and was impressed by the apparent support and mutual understanding among the women. During one of these meetings, a tearful young mother showed up with her toddler who was crying hysterically. They had just arrived at the RHSA for the first time a matter of minutes earlier and were severely shaken. I watched as several mothers physically embraced the woman and assured her that “things are going to be alright” and “we’re going to take care of you.” Their support and compassion made a visible impact on the new mother, who settled a bit and appeared grateful. Importantly, I noticed a marked difference in the relationships between mothers in these settings and those who were present at the shorter-term agencies, where I neither witnessed nor heard of meaningful relationships between families. In addition, it should be noted that even with the presence of supportive bonding relationships, daily life at most of the RHSAs remained difficult. In the midst of daunting personal and collective crises, families lacked the space, privacy, and autonomy possessed by most housed families.

Bridges and Advocates at RHSAs. I was struck by the overwhelmingly positive remarks that were made by mothers in describing their relationships with homeless agency staff members. In fact, 87% of the 151 survey respondents indicated that supportive relationships with agency staff were somewhat or very helpful for kids academically. Most of the staff members who were viewed so favorably were those who worked with mothers on a direct and regular basis—such as case managers and child development specialists. I describe the wide-ranging comments about these leaders here as they relate to daily support, information sharing, and advocacy.

Daily support. Numerous mothers depicted the daily support that they received from relationships with RHSA staff as extremely helpful or even “life saving.” One mother, for example, exclaimed, “If it wasn’t for this place [the long-term RHSA where she lives] as a cushion to fall back on, I don’t know
where I’d be. . . . It saves us.” Such remarks were plentiful and diversely framed, including the following:

She [her agency-based family specialist] is just, there’s no words for her. She’s just astounding. A beautiful person. Outstanding. She helps be become a beautiful person. I see the staff here glow and I glow. I see them walk proudly and I walk proudly. Their hope gives me hope. . . . This is what I need. I need a strong foundation. If it wasn’t for this place, I don’t know where I’d be. They’ve done wonders for me and my daughter.

I have a very good relationship. I can call her at any time. I’ve had different things that have happened to me like a death in the family or really anything, and she’s there. If I need help getting to appointments, she’s there. If I need help with my children, they’re there. . . . If you want it, they’re here. It definitely helps lead you to self-sufficiency.

My relationship with my case manager is one of complete honesty. I can really tell her things that are going on with me. Good things, bad things, whatever they are. It’s not even just my case manager either. Some of the other staff allow me to come to them and say, “Hey, this is going on in my life.”

The staff members’ value here was rooted in providing mothers with practical support and guidance (such as how to get kids enrolled in school) and emotional support and guidance amid tumultuous life conditions. Many of the parents’ descriptions of their relationships with staff members in such contexts focused generally on “getting by in life,” but in the schooling realm, these relationships appeared to serve as important foundations on which new educational possibilities could be built. These relationships were framed as particularly crucial in light of the previously described fractured personal relationship networks that many mothers and families had. Caring and competent RHSA staff members filled major life voids by providing fundamental supports that were theretofore nonexistent in the homeless families’ lives.

Information sharing. Earlier, I noted that there is a plethora of social and educational programs in the greater Centerville area but that many mothers did not perceive this to be the case. Their access to such programs was limited—not only because of distance and transportation issues but also because they simply did not know that most programs existed. RHSA staff members appeared to serve great utility in helping families overcome this information
barrier. At almost every focus group site, parents mentioned how helpful staff members were in getting them connected with wide-ranging opportunities for their families. For example, one mother stated that her case manager “went out and did the research” and ultimately found “four or five different day care options for me.” Another mother similarly explained,

They helped me find counselling and therapy for my kids to help us through all the madness that we’ve been through. She helped me get linked with child counselors that specialize in working with kids because they have different needs than I do.

Mothers’ comments here echoed the descriptions of Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, and Tsai (2004), Coleman (1988), Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, and Burke (2010), and Friedkin and Slater (1994) of how information sharing is a major benefit derived from social capital. Coleman noted that strategic relationships are important in that they can provide information in efficient ways—an assertion that appears on target in this homeless education context because the issue at hand is not that mothers are incapable of securing helpful education-related information but that they often lack the time and/or resources to do so. Staff members, then, served key roles as “bridges” to helpful programs, resources, and relationships for homeless families in Centerville.

Advocacy. As I spoke with mothers about their attempts to access and mobilize helpful resources and relationships in Centerville, they repeatedly referred to RHSA staff members as helpful advocates. This theme relates to the previous one, but here mothers took their statements further, for the staff members not only were cited as being valuable sources of information but also were described as being productive catalysts who were willing to “fight” for the homeless families in larger education and social circles. Many of the mothers had long struggled to find such advocates in their previous life situations and, in turn, were pleasantly caught off guard by the action orientations of certain staff members. The following statements from mothers highlight the value of staff members’ roles as advocates:

It took me a while to get used to them saying, “What can I do for you?” because at some of the other places [social service agencies] they say it but don’t mean it. Their hearts aren’t into it. You’re just paperwork. It never panned out, it never came through. So, here, when she said, “What can I do?” I was like, “Well, what can you do?” That was my attitude. When they started explaining all that they could do, I was like,
“Wow, well I could use this and I could use that.” And even if they couldn’t do it physically, they can direct you to someone who can do it. It’s been really helpful.

When I first came here, I didn’t want my daughter to have to change schools again—that would have been her third time this school year. And Shirley [staff member] made some phone calls and made sure that she could stay in the same school.

If you present a problem to them, they can fix it. . . . A lot of times, I can’t reach my goals and I need a little boost—like we all do. I need a little step ladder to get me just a little bit higher. So I’m just thankful that there are so many resources here that help us with our networking. I’ve found that to be quite significant.

It’s quite a thing to have someone like her in your corner.

**Accessing the “Right” RHSA.** The many positive statements from mothers that are presented here are likely not representative of the perceptions of Centerville’s broader sheltered homeless population, for the previously described variability in RHSA capacities and missions suggests that the relationships and resources that were described by this study’s participants are not possible (or, in some cases, even sought) in many RHSAs. My sample was purposefully chosen—I wanted to speak with parents from family-friendly RHSAs that provided education services. Accordingly, I heard stories about services and personnel that were committed to productive educative action. Many RHSAs do not have such commitments. Although I had the benefit of being referred to such RHSAs from Centerville County leaders who knew the ins and outs of the system, I learned through the focus groups that most mothers lacked such insights when they needed to seek shelter. In situations of crisis and emergency—where they were attempting to flee from abusive predators and/or find shelter for their young children—it appeared that most mothers resorted to making quick, sometimes ill-informed decisions about where to go. Many of their comments indicated that their initial RHSA stays were highly unpleasant ones that led them to quickly relocate to other places until they ended up in stable and productive environments for their families. These times of transition were described as being highly difficult and sometimes dangerous:

I was kind of pushed around in the system. I’ve gone from place to place. Things just weren’t working at those places [other RHSAs] and so I had to back to my old [abusive] relationship.
All of a sudden I had nothing. And nobody there could give me any answers—or they didn’t feel like giving me any answers. I just didn’t know what to do.

In concert with the mothers’ statements in this regard, Centerville County data reveal extremely high rates of interagency mobility among homeless families. Of the families (and, in some cases, individuals) who, throughout 2008–2009, lived in 20 agencies that I surveyed, 49% had previously been living in another RHSA. This means that about half of the residents were forced to move from one RHSA to another at least once during that span. Furthermore, analysis of the average lengths of individuals’ stays in RHSA programs during 2008–2009 (refer to Table 4) also illustrates that there are extremely high rates of turnover. Some of these numbers can be explained by the short-term nature of certain RHSAs (that have 30- or 60-day residential limits), but others are surely the result of client–agency mismatches.

The numerous conversations that I had with mothers left me with the impression that families’ ultimate placements in “the right” RHSAs—ones that provided them with supportive relationships and resources—were largely acts of happenstance. I asked mothers how they found out about, gained access to, and mobilized RHSA resources, and they tended to respond with answers such as, “By the grace of God,” “I had a friend who told me about it,” and “I just happened to pick up a brochure.”

**Summary of Facilitators of Access and Mobilization.** Families’ access to and mobilization of RHSA-based relationships and resources were richly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time at destination</th>
<th>Clients</th>
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<tr>
<td>Less than 1 month</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4–5 years</td>
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<td>6–7 years</td>
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<td>8–10 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,627</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
described by mothers as important sources of stabilization and support. Importantly, their RHSA connections also helped them develop multitudes of other connections and productive actions. A snowballing of other school- and community-based resources and relationships resulted from their RHSA relationships. RHSA staff members, in this regard, seemed to take on Lin’s (1999) description of “bridges” for homeless families. Their boundary-spanning capacities (Miller, 2008a, 2009a) in the broader Centerville education network allowed them to inform families of educational opportunities and, in many cases, to actively advocate for families who were immersed in network navigation struggles. It was apparent, however, that families’ accessing and mobilizing of helpful RHSAs were often matters of chance—they came to productive educational environments through trial and error. Their seemingly random travels through the larger RHSA system may not be tied to actual gaps in system offerings—for there are Centerville-based social service agencies that help direct families to appropriate services. Rather, most families appear to lack knowledge about these services. This dilemma exemplifies how families’ dearth of systemic awareness and information serves as a barrier to their access to and mobilization of the homeless education network. So despite the apparent effectiveness of certain RHSAs in catalyzing productive action for families, the challenge remains as to how families might make their initial connections with “the right” RHSA for their needs.

Discussion

In this discussion section, I refer to some key elements of Lin’s (1999, 2000) network theory of social capital to reflect on the findings and consider how they might guide school- and community-based leaders to maximize their catalytic potentials in homeless families’ education lives.

Considering Density and Bridges in Network Utility

Lin (2000) notes that the ideal constitution of one’s relational network is largely dependent on that individual’s specific needs. In situations where a person desires basic life supports and/or the preservation of what he or she already has, a dense, closed network—one that is made up of tight bonds with family, friends, and trusted others—is most advantageous. Coleman’s (1988) seminal work on social capital theory, for example, delineates many benefits of such closed networks. Lin supports many of Coleman’s assertions, however; when one wants to expand to new professional, social, and/or educational horizons, he claims that a “bridging” network—one that is composed of
“weaker ties” with different types of people—might be needed. Lin (2000) notes that there are multiple advantages to heterogeneous networks, which he says tend to be more “resource rich” than densely composed, homogenous networks. He explains, “Resource-rich networks are characterized by relative richness not only in quantity but also in kind—resource heterogeneity. Cross-group ties facilitate access to better resources and better outcomes for members of the disadvantaged group” (p. 787). So, to reiterate, although heterogeneous, bridging networks (generative ones that are made up of individuals from wide-ranging backgrounds and affiliations) and dense, more homogeneous networks both have certain advantages, Lin posits that social capital utility is ultimately tied to individuals’ needs and aspirations. Different types of networks serve different types of purposes.

The findings from this study suggest that network density is indeed an important notion to consider. The sheltered mothers with whom I spoke described their personal relational networks as fractured and often dangerous. They lacked the daily supportive bonds that many people rely on to get through difficult phases of life and, as a result, had to resort to moving their families to RHSAs. During these difficult times of homelessness and broken relationships, it appeared nearly impossible for mothers and their children to fully engage the education process. Issues of transportation to school, day care, and after-school programs were daunting. Concerns for safety and stability were prominent. Their fundamental “getting by” needs were not met. In these instances, mothers demonstrated needs for tight bonds. They craved the trusted support, insight, and guidance that often accompany dense networks (as described by Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). It was encouraging, then, to note the promising capacities of long-term RHSAs in providing such bonds (as manifested in relationships between mothers and RHSA staff members and between mothers themselves). On mobilizing these relationships, families gained stability and safety that helped them deal with the duress of homelessness and, in turn, begin considering bridges to new possibilities. Tightly knit, dense networks, then, appear to be fundamentally important for many homeless families.

The bridging capacities of RHSAs also emerged as highly promising. Well-connected agency staff members helped families overcome information barriers, and they advocated for mothers and students in broader education network contexts. Families, in turn, were able to access and mobilize diverse community relationships and resources that had previously perceived as being unavailable. With such network heterogeneity, mothers described new hopes for themselves and their children. Again harkening back to Lin’s (1999) assertion that the utility of one’s network composition is dependent on individual aspirations, families’ bridging needs appeared to be particularly attached to
their needs to overcome information deficits and become connected to diverse community assets.

So the question of whether dense, closed networks or heterogeneous, bridging networks are best for homeless families is answered on a case-by-case basis. Families’ unique situations dictate which types of social capital networks will serve them best. A key consideration, then, is what role RHSAs and schools can and should play in helping access and mobilize bonds and bridges.

**Determining RHSA Roles**

RHSA leaders emerged as important actors in homeless families’ education networks, and although they were cited as providing a host of valued services, I suggest that their utility might be maximized if they purposefully consider their particular RHSA structures and their locations in relation to school and community resources. In terms of structure, long-term RHSAs—those where families tend to stay for at least several months—clearly have opportunities to provide mothers and children with both supportive bonds and strategic bridges. Many of these RHSAs appear to be doing this already. Their capacities to provide sustainable, caring, and supportive relationships for families are of unquestioned value in families’ education pursuits. Their concurrent capacities to link families with appropriate day care centers, after-school programs, and the like—capacities that are rooted in their knowledge of these community resources and their willingness to continually learn about new ones—should continue to be developed.

The more complex consideration in regard to RHSAs and social capital facilitation relates to the roles that shorter-term RHSAs should take on. Only a few mothers at these places (with maximum stays of 30 or 60 days, but where families often stay for only a matter of days) mentioned the value of their bonds with RHSA staff members, and none of them mentioned forming strong bonds with fellow mothers. This is understandable in that the short-term stays that families had at these RHSAs were typically marked by crisis and high stress and these RHSAs did not systematically pursue mother–mother bonding or mother–staff bonding. I suggest, therefore, that short-term RHSAs might maximize their family-network-developing capacities by helping families make productive educational linkages *outside of the RHSAs*. Considering that families are with them for only a matter of days and that the mother–staff and mother–mother relational bonds that are forged in short-term RHSAs are not likely sustainable ones, staffs should develop systems of rapid bridging. Such systems might entail immediate diagnoses of students’ and families’ assets and needs followed by references to appropriate
community-based resources and relationships. Such action—which would be founded on staff members’ comprehensive understandings of local schools and social or educational programming—would grant families access to potentially enduring and institutionally attached relationships in their communities. Then, on leaving the RHSAs, families would not be left floundering and disconnected from broader social and educational structures. RHSA structure, then, is a central consideration in determining how staffs might help families strengthen and/or expand their networks—what works in some structures simply cannot work in others.

RHSA location also must be considered here, for even though a vast array of educational and support services are offered in the Centerville community, their accessibility is dependent to a significant degree on RHSAs’ proximities to them. RHSAs (both long and short term) that are located in or nearby downtown Centerville might focus their efforts on connecting families to some of the many programs that are in that area. Others, such as Happiness and Soul Place, which are several miles (and long bus rides) away from the downtown abundance of resources, should consider developing their in-house educational services (tutoring, homework help, computer access, day care, etc.). Fortunately, most of the short-term RHSAs in Centerville—those that I previously suggested should focus on bridging work—are situated in or near downtown, so those bridging efforts might occur quite naturally and without major transportation problems.

A final consideration for RHSAs as social capital facilitators relates to their school-bridging capacities. Even though many of the staff members at RHSAs were undoubtedly effective at connecting families to community-based assets, few of them were noted as having particularly strong bonds with schools. In that children are often known to struggle academically, socially, and behaviorally during periods of homelessness and that RHSA staff members appear to be willing advocates for these students, such connections (RHSA–school) should be purposefully sought. The resulting school-based social capital might critically undergird homeless students’ growth and development.

**Unleashing School Potential**

Of all the elements of the larger homeless education network in Centerville, schools appeared to have the most potential for productive growth. It was interesting to hear so few mothers describe school actors as “important relationships” in their lives (a relatively small number of them mentioned principals, teachers, and/or counselors here). Schools can learn important lessons from RHSAs in serving and advocating for homeless students and their families—they too
can serve as invaluable bases for relational bonds and bridges. I suggest that this might occur in four specific ways.

First, key school actors such as teachers, administrators, social workers, and counselors must keep abreast of the shifting and expanding terrains of homeless education in their regions. RHSA leaders are immersed in the issue and appeared, in general, to be quite aware of the extent to which homelessness is escalating, but, based on the shared perspectives of mothers and agency staff members, it was not clear if school leaders had such sensitivities. This macro-level awareness could help set valuable foundations for committed and collective school-based action in the homeless education realm.

Second, school actors should build on their relationships with students and families to concurrently develop their “micro-level” awareness of the homeless situation. Teachers, counselors, and social workers in particular—those who have meaningful relationships with students—can, without becoming too intrusive, maintain active awareness of and responsiveness to their students who display signs of duress and potential homelessness. The “identification” role of schools can be especially important here because they have existing and potentially enduring relationships with many students and families whose relational networks are damaged and often dangerous. School actors, more so than most workers at social service agencies, witness and/or become aware of family homeless crises as they unfold. Even if they do not learn of families’ homeless conditions through observations of and/or words from students, they often learn that families are homeless when special transportation requests are submitted (per the stipulations of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act). This real-time awareness might allow schools to play more active roles in ensuring that fewer homeless families “fall through the cracks.”

Third, in addition to developing their macro- and micro-level awareness of the homeless situation in their communities, school actors can learn from RHSA staff members in expanding their knowledge of community-based education resources—including the RHSAs themselves. Numerous participants in this study benefited from their RHSA leaders’ impressive knowledge of community assets, and they could likely also derive widespread benefits from school social workers and counselors who had similar community familiarity.

The fourth consideration for schools, then—that schools can more actively serve in connecting families with community programs—builds directly on this school-based knowledge of local assets and resources. Even though all school districts are required to have a “homeless liaison” (an individual who is responsible for making sure that homeless students’ transportation arrangements are handled and that their basic rights are upheld), the thought here is that purposeful bridging and advocacy could be effectively handled
by multiple school professionals. Families’ haphazard navigation of RHSAs, for example, seems to be a major concern in Centerville because when crises happened, they did not know where to go or who to talk to. Astute, well-connected school workers could assist families here in referring them to appropriate RHSAs and/or other local people or services. Families’ chances of finding the “right” RHSA might increase significantly with this kind of collective school action. Schools might, in fact, play especially important bridging roles for doubled-up homeless students and families because, as noted earlier, these situations tend to be stifling or even dangerous ones that are difficult for community-based social service professionals to identify.

The roles of educational administrators—at both school and district levels—cannot be overemphasized in this crafting and implementation of responsive school systems. Superintendents, principals, and other key leaders, although often not as closely involved with homeless students on a daily basis as teachers and counselors, have capacities to provide their school-based colleagues with time, resources, and, importantly, awareness of homeless issues in their local settings. Thus, although the development of effective systems of school practice in contexts of homelessness clearly requires collaboration among diverse individuals, positional leaders play critical roles in establishing fertile ground for such work.

**Final Considerations**

A major point that has emerged from this research project is that “homeless education networks” need to be conceptualized beyond just school-based relationships. Although more focused and purposive school efforts could reap great benefits for homeless students and families, it is clear that their complex life issues require the engagement of diversely positioned individuals and institutions. Indeed, in addition to the aforementioned possibilities for enhanced school and RHSA action, other community-based education partners also need to be fully accessible to homeless families. Perhaps most importantly, as the micro-agentic elements of the homeless education network in Centerville, the ultimate mobilization of resources and relationships in Centerville is dependent on families who, in the midst of turmoil and instability, are able to capitalize on systemic opportunities that come their way.

There is extensive room for more research in the area of social capital and homeless education. Although groups such as the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and the National Center for Homeless Education have played invaluable roles in advocating for homeless students in multiple arenas, there is a need for meaningful and sustained...
empirical inquiry in university schools of education, which have a significant impact on broader education discourses and agendas. Departments of educational leadership and the wider University Council on Educational Administration community are well positioned to engage this work. Particularly of note would be work that examines how bonding and bridging relationships in multiple settings influence homeless students’ school-based achievement measures, work that tracks students’ longitudinal experiences during and after periods of forced mobility, work that examines roles and influences of gender in conditions of homelessness, and work that focuses on the nature and influences of specific school- and community-based educative tasks that are carried out by both formal and informal educational leaders. In addition, there is room for more robust use of social network analysis in studying education in contexts of homelessness, for this study was limited in that it did not determine the central versus peripheral nature of mothers’ and RHSAs’ positions within inter- and intra-agency networks. Furthermore, the use of social network analysis could potentially facilitate a clearer operationalization of notions of network density and bridging. Specific methodological insights might be gained from the work of Daly and colleagues (Daly et al., 2010; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Daly & Finnigan, 2011) as well as Brass et al. (2004) and Penuel, Riel, Krause, and Frank (2009), whose works examining leaders’ and teachers’ social networks have provided fresh perspectives on how inter- and intraorganizational relationship development and knowledge transfer can affect school practice.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all proper names throughout the study.
2. For a detailed review of these and other major social capital models, refer to Portes (1998).
3. This conceptualization of the homeless education network is purposefully broad, for, as described throughout the study, families’ school-based actions and experiences are intertwined with their actions and experiences in these other settings.
4. Many of the homeless women who participated in the study were victims of domestic violence (at the hands of male perpetrators), and the agency staff members suggested that they might not be as comfortable in a one-on-one setting with me (I am a male) as they would be in a group setting.

5. For details about the survey methods, please refer to Miller (2009b).

6. I chose these particular distances because 1 mile was deemed a walkable distance, 3 miles was deemed “busable,” and 5 miles was deemed best accessed with a personal vehicle. These residential homeless serving agencies were chosen because they were each particularly “data-rich” focus group sites that were located in different areas of Centerville.

7. To verify these estimated times, I spent many hours personally riding various bus and public transit routes. I found the estimates to be accurate. The bus trips from the outer areas of Centerville (such as the Soul Place neighborhood) were particularly lengthy—and often crowded and uncomfortable.

8. The school–community bridging work that is directed by the homeless liaison of the Minneapolis Public Schools appears to be a potentially valuable model for such work.

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**Bio**

**Peter M. Miller** is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research focuses on issues of community-based educational leadership, interagency collaboration, homelessness, and social capital. His work has appeared in a number of journals, including *Educational Administration Quarterly, Journal of School Leadership, Teachers College Record*, and *Urban Review*. 