

The background of the slide is a vibrant purple with a marbled, textured appearance, resembling crumpled paper or a liquid effect. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is centered on the slide, containing the title and author information.

# **Stereotypes about Homelessness within Children's Picture Books**

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**Emily Wright, OCT**

As an educator, I consider myself a strong advocate with a love for social justice and picture books. Therefore, when I decided to apply to The Ontario Institute of Studies in Education I already had an idea I wanted my research focus to be on the topic of homelessness because of my own personal connection to the topic based on my own experiences. I also wanted to explore the topic in more depth because I believe it is a topic that is often forgotten within the school context.

However, my ideas were broad and I had a difficult time deciding how such a topic, as important as it is, could be used to serve students and teachers in the province of Ontario. After a few research classes, my professor told me to narrow down my thinking by merging my passions together. I realized that almost every person who has experienced homelessness has most likely attended a school at some point in their life. Thus, my research project was born: the exploration of stereotypes about homelessness within children's picture books.

From my personal experience, bringing the issue of homelessness into classrooms can be challenging. I think one such reason is that there is this societal value that our children should be kept innocent as an act of protection. However, if we want to make well-rounded students who are not only going to become thriving adults but also have the critical thinking skills required to function in the 21st century, we must equip them with information about the messages they receive through the media in all its forms.

This research paper provides four picture book suggestions that educators can bring into their classrooms to discuss the issue of homelessness. By analyzing both the text and illustrations of the books, I have provided many suggestions on the stereotypes that exist within some of the books and the deconstruction of stereotypes in others. My hope is that this research paper will allow teachers to feel more comfortable bringing content on the topic of homelessness into their classrooms and play a role in helping students become aware of their own biases and pre-conceived notions.

This research paper is important to me personally because at the age of 18 I experienced homelessness on the streets of downtown Toronto. Although I did not write this paper because of my own experiences, my own experiences are intertwined within this paper as they played a role in the way I analyzed my data and the lens I used when digging deeper into the content and illustrations. My only request to my readers is that you take the time to reflect on your own thoughts, opinions and biases on the topic of homelessness. Try to remember how you first came to understand these biases and how these biases affect you today. We all carry our own biases but it is only with awareness of where these biases come from that we can begin to create students who are change makers, becoming one ourselves in the process.

EMILY WRIGHT



Raising the Roof believes that in order to end homelessness we must focus on preventing its occurrence in the first place. We are committed to changing the discussion on the issue of homelessness to focus on 'upstream' strategies rather than the emergency response.

Stigmas associated with homelessness are perpetuated in a wide range of media; from news coverage to children's books. We aim to increase education and community engagement on the issue of homelessness.

Homelessness is not an issue that impacts only single white, able-bodied men. For example, specific demographic groups such as youth, LGBTQ2S, and Indigenous peoples are over-represented in the homelessness population. Furthermore, the number of families at risk of homelessness is ever increasing as the cost of living continues to climb.

In order to create a national paradigm shift towards the prevention of homelessness, we need to change the way all Canadians think about the issue and to educate on the true risk factors that can lead to homelessness.

Raising the Roof is proud to support Emily Wright's research paper, 'Stereotypes about Homelessness within Children's Picture Books', as it inspects the way in which primary school literature, specifically picture books, portray the issue of homelessness. This paper calls educators to think critically about the literature on homelessness and support students to do the same. Through critical practice, educators can play a role in changing the national dialogue on homelessness and build students' skills to create social change for future generations.

ELISA TRAFICANTE

*(DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AT RAISING THE ROOF)*



Emily Wright's research project on Homelessness makes a number of important contributions to teaching. Her study, *Stereotypes about homelessness within children's picture books*, addresses head-on the challenge of how individuals, already struggling in their lives, are further victimized by the limiting and derogatory assumptions others make about their lives and about them as people. As Emily discusses, these kinds of conclusions distort the reality of people's lived experiences. As she points out, these views exist in the media as well, in the descriptors used about homeless people which too often infer that they have somehow brought this situation on themselves. Helping students understand that many different kinds of people, from different walks of life, different cultures, and families as well as individuals can find themselves in this situation can encourage student engagement and empathy and ultimately sharing these values make for a more just and humane society.

Picture books, as Emily suggests, have historically been describing largely white, middle class and affluent lives, and few offer more than simplistic portrayals of those outside of that more privileged social location. Emily's thoughtful analysis of each of the four books that she reviews provide many examples and issues that teachers could use to open up potential opportunities to both deepen student thought about the challenges of being homeless and build student empathy towards others. Additionally, her analysis also points out the important role of images in story books that may either consolidate an existing stereotype or open up the possibility for students to ask questions.

Emily's research project is a wonderful example of how research and teaching are deeply intertwined, a value that lies at the heart of our Master of Teaching program, from which Emily recently graduated, and one that is reflected across OISE's mission and values:

OISE is committed to enhancing the social, economic, political and cultural wellbeing of individuals and communities locally, nationally and globally through leadership in teaching, research and advocacy.

We are so proud of our students and their ongoing commitment and passion for making the world a better place through education. Emily's research project is a wonderful example of that passion in action.

CLARE BRETT, PHD  
(CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM,  
TEACHING AND LEARNING ONTARIO INSTITUTE OF STUDIES IN EDUCATION)



# Table of Content

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>11</b>
Research Context.....	11
Definition of Terms.....	11
Research Problem and Rationale.....	12
Statement of Purpose.....	12
Research Questions.....	12
<b>Literature Review.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Study Design.....	16
Sample Method.....	16
Sample Criteria.....	16
Data Analysis.....	16
<b>Research Findings and Discussion.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Representation of People Experiencing Homelessness.....	19
Stereotypical Images and Messages about Homelessness.....	19
The Pictorial Depiction of Seasons.....	20
Using Social Justice Picture Books about Homelessness in Ontario Classrooms.....	21
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>24</b>
Implications for Practice.....	24
Implications for Stakeholders.....	24
Implications of Research.....	24
Closing Remarks.....	25
<b>References.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Appendix A.....	32
Appendix B.....	33



**This paper is dedicated to all the educators in Ontario who want to inspire their students by deconstructing existing stereotypes about homelessness.**

## Abstract

Research confirms stereotypical images of homelessness are found in children's media that can further stigmatize people experiencing it. The primary focus of this qualitative study was to investigate how stereotypes are constructed and dismantled within children's picture books by examining character representations, common stereotypical images, and ways in which these images can be countered. By selecting picture books through random sampling, four picture books were skimmed, read and interpreted using colour coding to organize data and determine results. Findings showed two of the four books supported evidence that children's authors construct stereotypical images. Specifically, stereotypes that depict mainly white, middle-aged, non-disabled men, often viewed as dirty, dishevelled and socially inferior, carrying bags, sleeping in cardboard boxes, and searching garbage bins for food. In contrast, the other two books showed authors attempting to dismantle familiar stereotypes by incorporating a wider range of character identities and representing people experiencing homelessness as ordinary people. Interestingly, three of the four books showed support offered to those experiencing homelessness during cold winter months, suggesting a seasonal bias. Conclusions of the study illustrate the need for stakeholders to help children develop skills to critically analyze reading material to determine if images are fairly and realistically represented, and to help them better understand the ways in which biased images can contribute to fear and discrimination.

**Key Words:** picture books, children's books, homelessness, homeless, stereotypes, stigma, construct, dismantle, representation, children, social justice, Ontario classrooms

## Introduction

### Research Context

Homelessness can be viewed from a variety of lenses, but unless people experience it personally, like I have, their awareness of its complex issues comes from stories and images presented through a variety of mediums. Research confirms that documents, texts and messages from the media, contribute to the way members of society view people experiencing homelessness (Calder, Moira, Handsard, Richter, Burns & Mao, 2011; Richter, Kovacs, Chaw, Calder, Mogalw, Goin, Mao, & Schnell, 2011; Cohen, Wagner, 1992; Snow, Anderson, Koegel, 1994; Lee, Link, Toro, 1991; Penner, Penner, 1994; Buck, Toro, Ramos, 2004; Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang, & Paradis, 2009; Sensoy, DiAngelo, 2017). Instead of presenting an in depth, varied viewpoint, the literature also shows that texts and documents present stereotypical images of people experiencing homelessness (Calder et al., 2011; Richter et al., 2011; Cohen, Wagner, 1992; Snow et al., 1994; Lee et al., 1991; Penner, Penner, 1994; Buck et al., 2004; Hulchanski et al., 2009; Sensoy, DiAngelo, 2017). These stereotypical images often reflect simplistic viewpoints that limit the understanding of who those experiencing homelessness are and distort the reality of their lived experience. These distortions can add to the stigmatization of people experiencing homelessness, while also impacting social justice efforts.

### Definition of Terms

Homelessness is an umbrella term used to describe an array of “social and economic policy failures” (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p.6). With the addition of the suffix ‘ness’ to the word homeless the word becomes “an abstract noun,” that readers can interpret anyway they choose (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 5). One can argue that the word homeless has historically held one meaning; someone without a home.

In this paper, homelessness will be described as “[a] situation of an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing or the immediate prospect, means or ability of acquiring it.”(Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2017, p. 1). The term stereotypes is also used frequently. ‘Stereotypes’ are defined as “simplified and standardized conceptions or images invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Stereotypes are learned ideologies each of us hold due to our own personal experiences and cultural understanding of the world. This paper will also recurrently utilize the term ‘children’s picture books’. In this paper, children’s picture books will be described as a medium that “typically contain[s] 32 pages of central text [which include illustrations]; the peritext of pages for the title, copyright, dedication, appendices, and end papers; front and back covers” (Enriquez, 2014, p. 30).

Before continuing, it is important to point out my own positionality as the author of this paper. I am a white, heterosexual woman who grew up in an affluent family in downtown Toronto. Despite the opportunities and privileges I was granted due to my high socioeconomic status, in high school I became addicted to drugs which led to me experiencing homelessness for two years. My experiences with homelessness are important to state as this personal experience plays a critical role in the lens I will use when analyzing the data.

## Research Problem and Rationale

Children are influenced by the media that surrounds them in books, on television, in pictures and in film. Teachers are in the best position, next to parents, to help children analyze these images in order to help them develop a deeper and more realistic understanding of the social themes and issues found in stories and in our world.

By examining picture books written for young children, teachers can develop a better understanding of how those experiencing homelessness are being presented in the media. This can help them make more informed choices about the books they want to highlight in their classrooms, and the messages they want to convey to their students. As educators, when we bring picture books into our classrooms and share them with our students, we are also sharing and highlighting the messages they present. For students to understand and critically assess these messages and the societal issues involved, it is important that the stories and images teachers share with them depict realistic portraits of social justice situations rather than stereotypical images that can lead to prejudicial bias.

## Statement of Purpose

To better understand how those experiencing homelessness can be stigmatized through stereotypical viewpoints, the purpose of my research study was to critically examine how stereotypes about homelessness are constructed and dismantled within children's picture books accessible to Ontario teachers. After a selection process I chose four children's books to focus on: *Lily and the Paper Man* (2007) by Rebecca Upjohn, *The Can Man* (2010) by Laura E. Williams, *The Cardboard Shack beneath the Bridge* (2007) by Tim Huff, and *Still a Family* (2017) by Brenda Reeves Sturgis.

## Research Questions

The primary focus of this study was to investigate how stereotypes about homelessness are constructed and dismantled within children's picture books accessible to Ontario teachers. To accomplish this, three questions were examined.

How did the authors of the books represent those experiencing homelessness?

What stereotypical images and messages about homelessness were found in each book?

Were resource materials or background information about the positionality of the author provided?

## Literature Review

### The Construction of Stereotypes about Homelessness

Research shows that the media plays a large role in how the public perceives the issues presented to them (Lee et al., 1991; Shinn, 1992; Snow et al., 1994; Richter et al., 2011). Due to this research finding, many studies have been conducted on the stereotypical views the media disperses on a multitude of issues, including those experiencing homelessness (Calder et al., 2011; Richter et al., 2011; Cohen, Wagner, 1992; Snow et al., 1994; Lee et al., 1991; Penner, Penner, 1994; Buck et al., 2004; Hulchanski, et al., 2009; Sensoy, DiAngelo, 2017). This media related research is important to my study because the messages disseminated in media often mirror the viewpoints we as a society hold about important issues, such as homelessness.

Buck et al., (2004) conducted a related study of articles in newspapers published on the topic of homelessness between the years 1974 and 2003. Their study focused on newspapers in four states: New York, Washington, Los Angeles and Chicago. The researchers found over 9,032 articles that used the term homelessness which were evaluated for how those experiencing homelessness were verbally represented and visually portrayed, as well as “structure, economics, deinstitutionalization, and government factors” (p. 157). Overall, Buck et al., (2004) found the word homelessness was used much more frequently in relation to “individual deficits and deviance,” (Buck et al., 2004, p. 151; Shinn, 1992; Snow et al., 1994; Richter et al., 2011), rather than in relation to the “structural or economic factors” (Buck et al., 2004, p.159) that affect homelessness.

Those experiencing homelessness are often represented in the media as “passive,” “isolated” and “unable to act on their own behalf” (Cohen, Wagner, 1992, p. 21; Penner, Penner, 1994, p.

774), as “disaffiliated and disempowered...lacking social skills to act together”, (Cohen et al., 1992, p. 22), and being “socially deviant” (Cohen et al., 1992, p. 28).

Penner and Penner (1994) also noticed negative language and descriptions used throughout media articles to describe people experiencing homelessness such as; “pushing a shopping cart...scavenging for food in dumpsters... sleeping on the sidewalk....and being dirty” (p. 774). Some articles go as far as describing those experiencing homelessness as “distorted, flawed, crazy, drunk, sick and stoned” (Snow et al., 1994, p. 462). This is further emphasized by research conducted by Calder et al., (2011) which shows that in general, the media places the culpability of homelessness on individuals with lower societal positionality. Although the researchers concluded that there are a variety of perspectives the media could use to view homelessness, the media tends to present only one perspective to the public at a time, which can limit the public’s awareness of the various “systemic and economic issues” related to homelessness.

## The Importance of Social Justice Picture Books

There is vast amounts of research on the importance of using social justice in the classroom to create respectful, caring and equitable classroom environments (Mackey, Lockie, 2012; Mackey, Alphen, 2016; Zakin, 2012; Gunn, de Vocht, 2011; Hyland, 2010; Phillips, 2010; Crisp, Knezek, Quinn, Bingham, Giraardeau & Starks, 2016; Burke, Collier, 2016; Shelton, McDermott, 2010; Hall, 2004; O'Neil, 2010; Hawkins, 2014; Buck et al., 2004; Warke, 2012).

*One of the benefits of using picture books with a social justice focus is that they can provide a bridge for teachers to foster social justice conversations with their students (Shinn, 1992; O'Neil, 2010; Burke, Collier, 2016).*

Picture books are essential to homelessness teachings because children learn how to “develop the imaginative capacity to put [themselves] into the place of others” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.353; Burke et al., 2016, p.283) when engaged with a story. Using picture books to discuss homelessness also helps students see various perspectives and points of view, and provides a venue for students to question equity and justice as it relates to their personal understanding and experiences (O'Neil, 2010; Burke et al., 2016; Roche, 2015; Mackey, Alphen, 2016).

According to Crisp et al. (2016) “the world of picture books is overwhelmingly white. It is also a world that is predominantly upper middle class, heterosexual, nondisabled, English speaking, and male” (p. 29). This creates a problem for any student who does not see themselves in such stories, those who “fall outside mainstream cultural identities” (p. 29), or are experiencing homelessness themselves. The way characters experiencing homelessness within picture books are represented affects the way students perceive the types of people who experience

homelessness. Therefore, the representation of people experiencing homelessness within children's picture books became an important focus of my research.

Despite the importance of using social justice picture books to “re-examine concepts of normalcy” (Enriquez, 2014, p. 25) and become “agents of change” (Mackey, Alphen, 2016, p. 355) a recent evaluation by Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman and Townsend (2015) found that authors are still not writing social justice themed books. In fact,

*Their research found that out of 3500 children's books published in the year 2014, only 11% included discussions on topics such as homelessness (Horning et al., 2015).*

This research is valuable to my study because it demonstrates the minimal number of social justice picture books being published, which creates less choices and options for educators when choosing books on the topic of homelessness to bring into their classrooms.

## Bringing Children's Books on Homelessness into Ontario Classrooms

Each picture book is written and illustrated by individuals who have their own views of the world, their own values and their own biases that they bring into texts as they construct them (Freebody, Luke, 1990; Janks, 2000; Jones, 2006, Enriquez, 2014). The authors and illustrators preconceived notions on a topic, limited direct knowledge, or privileged interpretation can sometimes create social stereotypes simply by offering a “simplistic portrayal of social inequalities” (Enriquez, 2014, p. 30).

This made researching the background of the authors - their education, experiences and firsthand knowledge on homelessness - an important component of this paper.

According to Anstey and Bull (2009) picture books are useful for teaching social justice in classrooms as the picture book does “not discriminate between children’s ages” (p. 29).

*Therefore, it is fundamental that teachers have a comprehensive understanding of social justice issues so they can make thoughtful and meaningful choices about the type of literature they are exposing to students in their classrooms (Freebody, Luke, 1990; Janks, 2000; Jones, 2006, Enriquez, 2014).*

Hopefully, examining the construction of stereotypical viewpoints in current and popular children’s picture books will assist educators in making informed choices about the type of texts they expose their students to.

Hall (2004) recognizes the power teachers have in influencing children’s ideologies through their own personal values. She finds pre-conceived notions and understanding of social justice issues by educators affects the type of picture books and materials provided to students. In addition,

*Burke and Collier (2016) find that social justice teaching can be difficult because it “operates in contrast to media portrayals” (p 272).*

Therefore, many teachers and educators are “fearful of topics such as oppression, equity and activism” (p. 273) because the topics are provocative and often, hotly debated (Bender-Slack, 2010; Pierce, 2006; Burke et al., 2016).

*However, finding the willingness and ability to overcome such fear is important because research shows that at an early age children are aware of discrimination and can be influenced by prejudicial messages (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995; MacNaughton,*

*2003; Derman-Sparks & Ramsay, 2011; Hawkins, 2014).*

## Methodology

### Study Design

The purpose of this research study was to critically examine how stereotypes about homelessness are constructed and dismantled within children's picture books accessible to Ontario teachers. In order to carry out my investigation, I conducted a qualitative study using document analysis. I selected document analysis for this particular study because documents, such as picture books, are "social facts which are produced, shared and used in socially organised ways" (Atkinson, Coffey, 1997, p. 47). According to Bowen (2009) using document analysis can be a "low-cost way to obtain empirical data as part of a process that is unobtrusive and nonreactive" (p. 38).

### Sample Method

When selecting the children's picture books for this document analysis study, I first created a list of as many children's picture books I could find on the topic of homelessness using the online search engine Google. Then, I asked specific selection questions (see appendix B) to determine which books generated from the Google search fit within the criteria selected for analysis in this study. Finally, in order to decide which books would be analyzed without infusing any personal bias into the selection process, random selection was utilized. Random sampling was fundamentally important to this research study because of my positionality. Random sampling was achieved by writing the name of each picture book that met the selection criteria on a piece of paper and randomly selecting four pieces of paper from a hat.

### Sample Criteria

The picture books evaluated met specific criteria. They were all published within the last twelve years and met the definition of picture book as defined by Enriquez (2014). The books also had to focus on the topic of homelessness as

defined by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2017). Within that definition, the picture book also had to use words to describe a physical person, therefore, any books about homelessness that featured animals or objects were omitted. The picture books that remained after the elimination process were then chosen through random sampling in order to acquire unbiased results (Suresh, Thomas, Suresh, 2011).

### Data Analysis

After analyzing each book, I wrote an analytical memo describing personal connections and ethical dilemmas, emerging patterns that relate to the research question, theories, themes, codes or concepts, and reflected upon any problems within the study, future directions or information that was important for the final report (Saldaña, 2013). According to Clarke (2005) "memos are sites of conversation with ourselves about our data" (p. 202). Then I placed all the post-It notes on the ground and organized them by colour, looking for common themes and connections.





## Research Findings and Discussion

Most of the existing research evaluated for this paper acknowledges gaps and inconsistencies in the use of social justice themes in picture books with a noticeable lack of books focusing on issues of homelessness, poverty and class (Blaska, 2004; Chaudhri and Teale, 2013; Crisp, 2015, Crisp, Knezek, Girardeau & Starks., 2016).

### The Representation of People Experiencing Homelessness

In the picture books *Lily and the Paper Man* (2007) by Rebecca Upjohn and *The Can Man* (2010) by Laura E. Williams the characters experiencing homelessness, neither of whom are main characters, are white, middle-aged men. Since these characters are secondary the lens in which they are viewed is through the perspective of the main characters who are children. The reader is not provided with a first-hand view of experiences with homelessness, but only with how they are seen by others. With white, middle aged men used to represent the person experiencing homelessness in these stories, the authors might give the impression that homelessness happens mainly to this type of demographic, instead of showing the wider reality that homelessness can happen to all people - people of colour, women, children or those with various gender identities. Placing these two books together as part of a classroom library could also inadvertently suggest that homelessness is deserving of greater attention because it targets white males.

However, in *The Cardboard Shack beneath the Bridge* (2007) by Tim Huff, people experiencing homelessness are represented differently. First, Huff uses his illustrations to show his readers that homelessness can happen to different types of people. This is evident on pages ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen and twenty of the book where Huff exemplifies homelessness as affecting women, children,

youth and men of various ages. Although most of Huff's characters within the book are white, he does use one representation of a person of colour experiencing homelessness on page seventeen.

Second, Huff also uses the words of his picture book to emphasize that homelessness can affect anyone. For example, on page nine, he asks his readers "Does someone live in it? A woman? Child? A man?" This question allows readers to think critically about who lives inside the cardboard shack without any illustration hints to assist in forming their opinion. Further, Huff intentionally uses quotation marks around the word "homeless" when he states "the person living there is "homeless" (p. 12). This lessens the stigma associated with the word. Huff takes this idea further by eluding "perhaps there is more than one" person living inside the shack.

*Still a Family* (2017) by Brenda Reeves Sturgis is a picture book that does quite the opposite of the first three books examined in relation to the representation of people experiencing homelessness. Sturgis represents the people experiencing homelessness in her book as people of colour and as a family unit - a mother, father and daughter. The pictures in the book depict the experiences of a little girl who lives in a shelter with her mother while her father stays at a shelter nearby. This not only conveys the idea that homelessness does not just happen to a select few or 'type' of person, but that it can happen to entire families.

## Stereotypical Images and Messages about Homelessness

Buck et al., (2004) found the word homelessness was used much more frequently in relation to “individual deficits and deviance,” (Buck et al., 2004, p. 151; Shinn, 1992; Snow et al., 1994; Richter et al., 2011), rather than in relation to the “structural or economic factors” (Buck et al., 2004, p.159) that affect homelessness. Researchers such as Calder, Moira, Hansard, Richter, Burns and Mao (2011) as well as Snow, Anderson and Koegel (1994) conclude that there are a variety of perspectives used to view homelessness, however, when speaking about issues, we tend to present only one perspective at a time which can limit students awareness of the various “systemic and economic issues” that relate to homelessness.

In addition, those experiencing homelessness are often represented within picture books as “passive,” “isolated” and “unable to act on their own behalf” (Cohen, Wagner, 1992, p. 21; Penner, Penner, 1994, p. 774), as “disaffiliated and disempowered...lacking social skills to act together”, (Cohen et al., 1992, p. 22), and being “socially deviant” (Cohen et al., 1992, p. 28). This is further emphasized by research conducted by Calder et al., (2011) which shows that in general, picture books that discuss this topic place the culpability of homelessness on individuals with lower societal positionality.

Both the Lily and the Paper Man and the Can Man are represented in a stereotypical way within the illustrations and words of each picture book. For example, in Lily and the Paper Man (2010), the man experiencing homelessness, Roy, is drawn with his hair “sticking up... all over his head,” “wearing a raggedy coat” that has visible holes and tears in it, mismatching shoes that are worn out, and his skin and face are represented as darker in certain places, as if he is covered in dirt (p. 3). In The Can Man (2007), Mr. Peters, is represented as a “homeless man pushing his battered shopping

cart” and as someone who “stopped and poked through the garbage with a large stick” (p. 2).

These illustrations reinforces the common stereotypical image of those experiencing homelessness as physically disheveled, dirty and disordered; the type of people who eat garbage. In addition, by referring to the person experiencing homelessness as a “homeless man” (p. 2), this book emphasizes that the man’s identity is that of a homeless person, instead of recognizing that homelessness is in fact, an experience and not a classification of people.

Although Tim Huff’s *The Cardboard Shack beneath the Bridge* (2007) makes use of various character types when representing the characters experiencing homelessness, Huff still depicts his characters experiencing homelessness in a stereotypical way visually throughout his illustrations. For example, on page ten the person experiencing homelessness is drawn without a face, so although we cannot assume age or race of the character he is still seen with a large backpack, carrying found objects, having holes in his clothes, and standing on loose pieces of newspaper. Meanwhile on page twelve, the same character is seen laying on the ground, backpack under his head, with the loose newspaper protecting his body from the elements. On the same page a woman and child are also pictured as experiencing homelessness, and although their clothes are not seen with holes, their faces are red and their skin appears to be dirty. Page twelve also features a middle age man experiencing homelessness, sitting on a park bench with his hat outstretched asking for help. This image of disorder is further perpetuated on page fourteen, where two middle aged men are seen sitting on the ground on top of blankets, with long beards, dirty skin and clothing; one is petting a large, well maintained dog.

Page fifteen shows a younger white male with long hair holding a bag. He is again presented with dirt all over his tattered clothing and face. Page seventeen represents the only black man in all the books, with images comparing the young black child he used to be before becoming homeless, to the dirty man he has become after experiencing homelessness. Perhaps this stereotypical way of representing people experiencing homelessness is Huff's way of having his reader identify the characters experiencing homelessness from those who are not, but his representations further construct and perpetuate stereotypical views.

The final book analyzed, *Still a Family* (2017) by Brenda Reeves Sturgis, is a picture book that does quite the opposite of the first three books examined in relation to the presence or absence of stereotypical images. Without words in the story that define the characters as homeless, nor any written signs in the illustrations that identify that the mother and children are staying in a "women's shelter", the reader would have no idea that the characters featured in the book are experiencing homelessness because no stereotypical connections are depicted. Instead, this book talks more about the reality of living in a shelter, being separated from a father, and that no matter what hardships they face, the unit is still a family. The language used within the book also does not stereotypically represent the idea of homelessness and instead puts the focus on how the family is the same as every other family.

Therefore, *Still a Family* (2017) deconstructs typical stereotypical viewpoints about the representation of people experiencing homelessness by illustrating pictures of the family doing everyday activities together such as using the "slides" (p. 7), making forts, playing with dolls, "petting puppies, or sniffing the flowers" (p. 8) and blowing kisses to each other (p. 10). By showing the family as a typical family, the economic reasons for their homelessness is emphasized instead of their physical appearance or personal identity. It is the circumstance, not

the person, pointing out that anyone can face the misfortune of homelessness.

### The Pictorial Depiction of Seasons

One of the overarching themes that became evident when analyzing the existing literature on stereotypes about people experience homelessness was the prevalence of an increased sense of awareness about issues of homelessness during the winter months (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1989; Lind, Danowski, 1999; Penner, Penner, 1994; Snow, Anderson, 1993; Snow et al., 1994; Richter et al., 2011; Calder et al., 2011; Lee et al., 1991; Buck et al., 2004; Hulchanski et al., 2009). Thus, analyzing the setting of each picture book to determine time of year was another important aspect of my analysis. Upjohn's book, *Lily and The Paper Man* (2010) is set in an urban city during the fall months. Illustrations on page one depict rain, while those on page eight portray snow covering the ground, and people wearing winter clothing. The winter aspect is further emphasized through the words of the book which state "Lily and her mother take the bus...Until the first snow falls" (p. 7). Lily also does not offer to help the Paper Man, Roy, until it is cold and snowing outside. Up until page seven, Lily is terrified of Roy and has done everything she can to avoid contact with him. As a researcher I am left wondering why Lily had a change of heart when it was cold outside. Could it be connected to the idea that winter and the cold months seems to produce a spirit of giving?

In *The Can Man* (2007) by Williams, a similar seasonal theme emerged. The introduction page of the book consists of an illustration of a trash can and fall leaves are featured on the pavement. This fall theme is further highlighted on page two where a tree is shown with no leaves left on its branches. It is not until page twenty-three of the book that the snow is depicted in the illustrations and the narrator mentions “small flakes of snow were sprinkling down from the sky” (p. 23).

It is also not until page twenty three that the main character, Tim, makes a decision to help Mr. Peters, also known as The Can Man by giving him the money he got from the cans he collected. The researcher in me is left again wondering why winter is depicted as a time that Tim wants to help the Can Man when during the fall months he was clearly determined to gather cans himself, collect the money, and buy himself a new skateboard. Again, this idea of the cold months fostering a spirit of giving is perpetuated both through the words of the book and the illustrations.

However, when I analyzed *The Cardboard Shack beneath the Bridge* (2007) by Tim Huff there was no clear indication of the seasons each person experiencing homelessness was living. This is mainly demonstrated through the illustrations within the book, where there is no snow or leaves on the ground, and the characters vary in whether they are portrayed wearing shorts or pants. This may have been done intentionally by the author given his positionality of advocating for people of all ages with a variety of challenges, such as poverty and homelessness, as a way to limit stereotypical ideas of winter being responsible for an increased interest in helping those experiencing homelessness. The same can be said of the Sturgis book, *Still a Family* (2017), where the book takes place during a variety of seasons throughout the year, helping the reader see that homelessness is an issue that affects families all year round.

*Therefore, two out of the four books*

*I analyzed support the evidence that some picture books continue to perpetuate social stereotypes set during the winter, while others work at deconstructing stereotypes by containing stories about homelessness set in all different seasons. More research is needed to further examine the prevalence of winter settings in picture books on the topic of homelessness in order to gain a clearer idea of how this stereotypical viewpoint is shared and what effects this commonness has on the reader.*

More research is needed to further examine the prevalence of picture books on the topic of homelessness being set during the winter months in order to gain a clearer idea of how this stereotypical viewpoint is shared and what effects this commonness has on the reader.

### **Using Social Justice Picture Books about Homelessness in Ontario Classrooms**

When children are in preschool they already have the capacity to “appropriate and manipulate” (Hawkins, 2014, p. 724) social justice treatises (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002; Connolly, 2003; Mundine & Giuni, 2006; Hawkins, 2014; Bunkerly-Bean, Bean, Sunday & Summers, 2017). Children are also aware of discrimination in the world around them and are able to understand when they observe or experience discrimination (Bunkerly-Bean, et al., 2017).

*With the help of an educator to scaffold such learning, children can begin to “expose, critique, challenge and transform ideas and actions that oppress or subjugate” (Hawkins, 2014, p. 726; Greene, 1998; Freire, 1993; Adams, 2007) those experiencing homelessness, reframing their point of view.*

Therefore, identifying how these picture books can be used in classrooms across Ontario was an important component of the analysis.

Both *Lily and the Paper Man* and *The Can Man* provide no resources for teachers to utilize when approaching the topic of homelessness with their students. However, both books did demonstrate small ways students can be involved in making a difference for someone experiencing homelessness in ways that are manageable for students to conduct. Although these books do not directly deconstruct stereotypical viewpoints about homelessness, they do provide wonderful opportunities for students to question the construction of stereotypes by evaluating the actions and reactions of the characters, the similarities in how the people experiencing homelessness are represented through the illustrations and text, and why winter has been used to signify a change in thinking for the characters.

Meanwhile, *The Cardboard Shack beneath the Bridge*, and *Still a Family*, both provide resources for teachers to use when talking to their students about homelessness. Huff provides a discussion guide at the end of the book for teachers to use as a guide when reading to their students. The guide encourages students to think critically about the book, and provides questions to facilitate discussion. This guide is helpful for teachers who might have little awareness on the topic of homelessness, or for teachers who are well versed on the topic and looking to expand their pedagogical understandings of social justice education. *The Cardboard Shack beneath the Bridge* also includes a letter from the former Lieutenant Governor of Canada praising the author for his book and dedication to bringing an important topic to the forefront of literature, as well as a message from Tim Huff to teachers explaining his thinking when he created the book. This also provides teachers with information on the author's positionality.

Overall, the entire book talks to students about ways to make a difference in the lives of people experiencing homelessness by breaking down stereotypical views about the types of people who experience homelessness, and helping to define what homelessness means in child friendly language. However, we must not forget that this book also stereotypically represents characters experiencing homelessness within its illustrations. Nonetheless, the illustrations and representations of people could provide a great learning opportunity for students to question who experiences homelessness and what those people might look like.

Finally, *Still a Family*, also provides explicit resources for teachers to utilize when teaching about homelessness, however, this book was published in the United States and the resources provided are therefore, American. Sturgis also writes a note for teachers and parents that defines homelessness, and breaks down some of the issues related to it in order to make the issue relatable for all students.

Social justice education supports children as they begin to construct information about who they are and where they fit into society (O'Neil, 2010). Through this process, children learn how to "distinguish between useful cultural expectations and harmful restrictions of stereotyping both themselves and others" (O'Neil, 2010, p. 47). By teaching social justice issues such as homelessness through children's picture books, children are able to make moral judgements, understand points of view, and demonstrate empathy as well as "extend themselves to understand, appreciate and care about others" (Hawkins, 2014, p. 734).

Many researchers have conducted studies on teachers' understanding of social justice issues and how it relates to their work with students (Agarwal et al., 2010; Bender-Slack, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 2009; McDonald, 2007; Burke, Collier, 2016).

These studies identify that teachers have the power to “open minds, incite investigations, and imagine possibilities for a more humanized and equitable world” (Enriquez, 2014, p. 29). According to Enriquez (2014) “to truly teach toward social justice and change, we as teachers and teacher educators need to also teach students how to read all texts through a critical literacy lens” (p. 35). This means teachers must ask questions that promote and encourage discussions about “class, power, ethics, and positioning” (p. 35). Educators can teach children about stereotypes that exist in society while suggesting personally relevant “counter messages” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 273; O’Neil, 2010) such as, not all people experiencing homelessness live on the streets, and that homelessness exists all year round.

## Conclusion

### Implications for Practice

Since there is a limited number of books published for children that focus on social justice issues, particularly those regarding homelessness (Blaska, 2004; Chaudhri, Teale, 2013; Crisp, 2015, Crisp, Knezek, Girardeau & Starks., 2016), by teaching social justice issues in the classroom teachers can motivate children, and parents, to ask for these types of books creating a larger demand, which could motivate authors to consider writing more about social justice themes. This would result in a larger pool of books from which teachers can choose providing a more varied representation of homelessness, lessening the presence and impact of stereotypical images. For young children, the stories in picture books may be their first contact with homelessness and other social justice issues.

They may not yet be able to recognize when a character or an illustration reflects a stereotype. Teachers can help foster the skills needed for them to critically analyze what they are reading to determine if the stories, people and facts found in media are being fairly and realistically represented. Research studies identify that teachers have the power to “open minds, incite investigations, and imagine possibilities for a more humanized and equitable world” (Enriquez, 2014, p. 29). This means teachers must ask questions that promote and encourage discussions about “class, power, ethics, and positioning” (p. 35). Educators can teach children about stereotypes that exist in society while suggesting personally relevant “counter messages” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 273; O’Neil, 2010) such as, not all people experiencing homelessness live on the streets, and that homelessness exists all year round.

### Implications for Stakeholders

Children reading books about homelessness are not the only stakeholders.

Teachers may also have children in their classrooms that are experiencing homelessness. Stereotypes found in books can impact them personally effecting self-image, confidence and their ability to navigate social experiences. It is important that teachers be able to address these issues when they arise, helping those children experiencing homelessness build self-esteem while also fostering resilience, empathy and social awareness. By reading picture books about homelessness to children, they can challenge and change their own perceptions and biases. When children have the tools to critically examine the books they read, they can, in turn, become ‘teachers’, who can help others recognize stereotypical images when present in books, encouraging increased awareness about homelessness.

### Implications of Research

There are several limitations to the literature and research that currently exists. Firstly, Shinn (1992) concluded that instead of the media focusing on stories about those people who are experiencing homelessness, the media needs to spend some time focusing on identifying the issues that impact homelessness (Shinn, 1992). Unfortunately, we as a society are still waiting for this to take place.

Secondly, according to Agarwal et al. (2010) and Burke and Collier (2016) due to the term social justice being used commonly in today’s teaching profession, it is easy for “teachers to claim he or she is teaching for social justice” (p. 271) without having an understanding of what that means. This is in large part due to the fact that diversity itself is a very ambiguous term (Johnson, Bob, 2008; Burke et al., 2016). Thornberg (2016) comes to a similar conclusion arguing that “teachers may lack professional terminology related to values or moral education and that they need more opportunities to discuss” (Thornberg, 2016, p. 243) social justice teaching strategies with their colleagues.



Only when educators develop a consensus regarding the meanings of these social justice terms, and are critically able to dismantle, not only the more obvious stereotypes represented in media, but also the more nuanced ones within their own viewpoints can they gain the skills required to be “explicit about integrating value in the curriculum” (Mackey, Alphen, 2016, p. 356) and, therefore, feel comfortable discussing issues of homelessness with their students.

Finally, it would be advantageous for there to be more research into how learning the skills and tools to recognize and dismantle stereotypical representations within media, can turn children from passive receivers of information into active change makers that can inspire and empower others around them to recognize, identify, and combat the underlying issues that cause homelessness and other social justice problems.

### Closing Remarks

Teachers in Ontario are beginning to understand the topic of social justice more clearly by beginning to situate themselves among existing social justice discourses (Hyttén, Bettez, 2011, p. 8-9). For many teachers, using social justice in the classroom is connected to their understanding of empathy, compassion and community. Others, teach social justice to encourage children to become citizens, fostering student abilities to be change makers that can take direct action on social justice issues such as food and clothing drives, writing letters to government officials, designing affordable housing, and analyzing the cost of homelessness (Burke et al., 2016; Shelton and McDermott, 2010). Some educators, like myself, teach social justice because it is important to who we are as individuals given our own life experiences. Social justice picture books on homelessness are a teaching tool that can lead to change and action.

It is clear from this study that stereotypes about those experiencing homelessness exist in children’s media.

When authors create picture books, like *Lily and the Paper Man* (2007) by Rebecca Upjohn, and *The Can Man* (2010) by Laura E. Williams that represent those who experience homelessness as social outcasts, with filth smeared faces, torn clothing, living in cardboard boxes and scavenging for food, their homelessness becomes identified with their character, rather than the economic hardship of their circumstances. Even if done in a story to distinguish those characters who experience homelessness from those characters who do not, attention still critically falls on the book’s focus, the ‘homeless character’ the ‘other’, who is not like us. Children can become, like Lily of the book, fearful of those experiencing homelessness, choosing to avoid and flee, decreasing empathy and the potential to understand and help.

However, when author’s attempt to dismantle common stereotypes and construct alternate representations of those experiencing homelessness, such as in *The Cardboard Shack Beneath the Bridge* (2007) by Tim Huff, and *Still a Family* (2017) by Brenda Reeves Sturgis, stereotypical images can be challenged and questioned, helping readers gain a deeper understanding of the social issues, building the empathy necessary to realize that there is no ‘other’. This is symbolized in Huff’s story, when standing before a cardboard box, the question is asked, ‘Who lives in there?’ It really could be anybody, but this can only be recognized and understood if children are empowered to ask the question and think critically about the answer. However, when the answer is provided by images that already define those who experience homelessness by common stereotype, children are less likely to ask questions. When, in *Still a Family*, children see a family similar to their own experiencing homelessness, with a child who is clean, well mannered, respectful and respectable, and parents who are loving and caring, they are better able to place the reason for homelessness on societal issues which increases empathy and helps encourage them to consider ways in which to provide support and be ‘change makers.’

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## Appendix A

### Research Protocol - Document Analysis Study

#### Content: Setting and Content (General)

1 – Where is the picture book set?

- spring/summer/winter/fall
- urban/rural

2 – What are the ages and genders of the main characters in the picture book?

3 – What adjectives are used to describe the main characters in the picture book and how are the main characters represented in the picture component of the book?

- If the person experiencing homelessness is not a main character, what adjectives are used to describe them and how are they represented in the picture component of the book?

#### Content: Stereotypes

4 – In what ways, if any, do these picture books construct stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness? What evidence is there of this?

- Which stereotypes do they construct?
- How do they construct these stereotypes?
- Are these stereotypes explicit or implicit?

5 – In what ways, if any, do these picture books dismantle dominant stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness? What evidence is there of this?

- Which stereotypes do they dismantle?
- How do they dismantle these stereotypes?

#### Content: Voice / Input of People Experiencing Homelessness

6 – To what extent are the experiences of people experiencing homelessness heard within these picture books?

7- To what extent are the experiences of people experiencing homelessness missing within these picture books?

8 – In what ways, if any, is there evidence that people who are or who have experienced homelessness were consulted when writing these picture books?

- What is the author's positionality?

#### Content: Teaching Social Justice Picture Books on Homelessness in Ontario Classrooms

9 – What evidence, if any, is there that information is available for teachers to use these picture books as a teaching resource/tool for all students in the elementary grades to better understand the topic of homelessness?

10 – What evidence, if any, is there of the importance of students taking their own social action to make change in their community?



## Picture Books Randomly Selected for Document Analysis

1. Huff, T. (2007). *The cardboard shack beneath the bridge*. Pickering, ON: Castle Quay Books.
2. Sturgis, B. R., Lee, J.S. (2017). *Still a family*. Chicago, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.
3. Upjohn, R., Benoit, R. (2007). *Lily and the paper man*. Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.
4. Williams, L.E., Orback, C. (2010). *The can man*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books Inc.

## Appendix B

### Document Selection Criteria and Process

- 1) I will use the search engine Google to find as many children's picture books on the topic of homelessness as I can.
- 2) I will make a list of all the books I discover through my google search.
- 3) Using my selection questions, I will decide which picture books fit my selection criteria and which do not.
- 4) I will then assemble a new list of relevant picture books for analysis that meet my criteria.
- 5) In order to decide which books to analyze without infusing any of my own bias into the selection, I will write the name of each book on a piece of paper and randomly draw 4 pieces of paper from a hat. This will allow me to randomly select the picture books I will analyze.

### Questions Guiding Selection Process

- 1) Is the book a typical picture book containing "32 pages of central text [which include illustrations]; the peritext of pages for the title, copyright, dedication, appendices, and end papers; front and back covers" (Enriquez, 2014, p. 30) ?
- 2) Is the focus of the picture book on the topic of homelessness as defined by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2017)?  
  
Homelessness definition: "describes the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing or the immediate prospect, means or ability of acquiring it." (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2017, p. 1).
- 3) Does the book use adjectives to describe a physical person experiencing homelessness? (Omit any books about animals or objects experiencing homelessness).
- 4) Was the book published or written in the last 12 years (2006-2018)?
- 5) Is the book available in hard copy? (Omit any Kindle only books).



**Stereotypes about Homelessness  
within Children's Picture Books**  
Emily Wright, OCT

Design and Layout by Yas Salame