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***From Charity to Equity: Race, Homelessness, & Urban Schools***  
**By Ann Aviles de Bradley**

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***Abstract***

*This review of From Charity to Equity: Race, Homelessness, & Urban Schools examines Ann Aviles de Bradley's ethnographic account of homeless educational policy in an age of colorblindness. As argued by the reviewer, this book is a powerful example of the ways in which ethnographic research allows for a "bottom-up," social justice approach that can project the voices of those most affected but least heard. As a collective, these voices call attention to larger systemic issues and stand to challenge the voices that dominate policy discourse and decision-making—those that are often most disconnected from everyday life within classrooms and schools.*

***Keywords:*** urban education; homelessness; educational policy; race

**Homeless Educational Policy in an Age of Colorblindness**

**Introduction**

Despite a more recent series of tragic, "color-coded" events that have forced public attention toward issues of race and racism, the dominant narrative is largely one of denial, avoidance and distortion—what Bonilla-Silva (2010) and others have called "colorblind racism." This persistent and all-pervasive form of systemic racism "explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (p. 2). Rising poverty and homelessness, particularly among children and youth of color (Grusky et al., 2004), increasing levels of residential and school segregation (Orfield et al., 2015), significant gaps in educational access, opportunity, achievement and attainment, and the fact that there are "more African-Americans under correctional control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850" (Alexander, 2013, p. 180), provide overwhelming evidence of this "new racism," wherein these and other significant racial disparities are argued away, often by well-meaning individuals, as having nothing at all to do with race.

Under this ideological scaffold, educational policies that seek to "leave no child behind" often function instead to deepen racial (and intersecting class-based) disparities. For example, although Black students are overrepresented among homeless youth in large urban centers, those who implement the McKinney-Vento Act, which aims to provide access to services and support for

homeless youth, largely ignore race as a factor that influences how and to what extent this policy will be implemented. But, as Aviles de Bradley (2015) writes:

The racialization process that exists in the United States permeates all social structures, policies, and daily interactions; therefore, it is critical to highlight the ways in which race plays an implicit and explicit role in McKinney-Vento policy or homeless educational policy (HEP). (p. 13)

Thus begins the author's thought-provoking, textual march towards social justice.

### **Overview of *From Charity to Equity***

The first several pages of *From Charity to Equity* provide valuable context for the author's ethnographic account of homeless youth of color within two Chicago public schools. In those pages, we are introduced to the scope of homelessness for children and youth within the US and in hyper-segregated Chicago Public Schools, and in particular: the complexity of what it means to be a homeless student; the educational policy meant to reduce barriers for these students (McKinney-Vento); and the lens through which the author examines the experiences and perspectives of students and school staff relative to homeless educational policy (Critical Race Theory). In these pages, we are made aware of the significant number of homeless children and youth within the US (approximately 1.6 million as estimated by The National Center on Family Homelessness) and the complexity of what it means to be an unaccompanied homeless student confronting the overwhelming obstacles stacked against this population (e.g., greater risk of abuse, homicide, suicide, illness, and mental health problems, issues of access to health care, and so forth).

The McKinney-Vento Act was introduced in the late eighties as a first effort to reduce access barriers and ensure greater stability for homeless students. But, as the author writes, "It has been 20 years since McKinney-Vento was first signed into law, yet many homeless students are still denied access to, and enrollment in, schools due to their status as homeless and based on their inability to provide records (e.g. furnishing a permanent address, immunization records), in direct disregard of the law" (2015, p. 7). Although Aviles de Bradley agrees that policy implementation is a serious concern relative to the effectiveness of McKinney-Vento, the author's close attention to race *and* class (racism and classism) as significant social barriers to education is arguably the book's greatest contribution. Though the author recognizes the complex intersection of race and class in perpetuating poverty and homelessness, she also notes that all too often homeless educational policy and those who facilitate its implementation neglect race while focusing solely on economic inequality, despite statistics that remind us of the socially and structurally embedded nature of racism (e.g., the majority of homeless youth within Chicago Public Schools are students of color; schools are more segregated today than in 1968, see Orfield et al., 2014). In order to position race solidly at the center of this research, the author examines McKinney-Vento using Critical Race Theory, thereby challenging the colorblind nature of our social institutions and the policies that govern them.

The author places the bulk of the book's content on the voices of students and school- and community-based adults in chapters two and three, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of those who facilitate the implementation of homeless educational policy (school staff, etc.) and those who are most affected (homeless students). In chapter two, we are introduced to the obstacles, challenges and triumphs of six individual, unaccompanied, homeless youth of color: John,

Natalie, Sheila, Jack, Michael and Leon. Each individual account offers a thick, ethnographic description of the student's biography, including their current living situation, and their experiences and perspectives relative to McKinney-Vento. These individual stories are laced with a critical analysis of race and reveal the ways in which the experiences of homeless students are deeply racialized.

Chapter three examines levels of awareness, understanding and accountability of school-assigned homeless liaisons, counselors, social workers and teachers, among other school staff. While adult voices reveal serious resource and support issues (e.g., lack of sufficient training and time to devote to their roles as liaisons) that work against the effective implementation of homeless educational policy, these voices also perpetuate the racialized context of the schools wherein McKinney-Vento plays out through colorblindness and charitable approaches to homelessness. These individual voices reflect deeper systemic issues relative to race and class: "...it is not their individual acts that limit access for unaccompanied homeless youth of color, but the larger system that views students of color in a particular way" (2015, p. 87). The final chapter considers specific policy implications that may help to move us away from a charity-based approach to homelessness, toward one that is equitable and justice-oriented. Based upon this research, the author's suggestions are concrete and logical, but as she importantly ends, we cannot assess or examine McKinney-Vento outside of the larger contextual factors that shape and influence not just the degree to which policy is implemented, but *how* this policy is implemented within active systems of oppression.

As we read the stories of unaccompanied homeless youth, the author asks that we "resist" feelings of sympathy and rather work to provide "stability, respect, educational access, and an educational system that honors and supports their efforts to remain engaged in school and reach their fullest potential" (2015, p. ix). This requires critical work and movement away from the popular deficit approach that pathologizes homeless youth in general, and homeless youth of color in particular.

### **Why You Should Read *From Charity to Equity***

This book is a powerful example of the ways in which ethnographic research allows for a "bottom-up," social justice approach that can project the voices of those most affected but least heard (Dimitriadis, 2015). These voices stand to challenge those that dominate policy discourse and decision-making—ironically, those who are often most disconnected from everyday life within classrooms and schools. This book is timely, as educational policy continues to demonstrate a limited interest in the voices of youth, particularly marginalized youth. While the author examines individual experiences, her approach reveals fault lines within the larger social system, challenging popular narratives surrounding the "failures" of individuals or particular groups (students, parents, teachers, administrators). Indeed, despite students' ambitions, hard work, perseverance and resilience, these stories are not those projected by media outliers that reinforce a meritocratic ideology (e.g., Liz Murray's journey from homeless to Harvard). As evidenced within this book, the structural obstacles for many homeless youth of color, including inequality of access and opportunity under policies created to reduce/eliminate those barriers, are just too great.

When I finished *From Charity to Equity*, I was deeply impressed by the care with which Aviles de Bradley presented voices with depth, authenticity, autonomy and clarity—all the while emphasizing the larger structural inequalities within which they live. However, this book, in all of its sincerity, smart edges, sound theoretical framework, and moments of thick ethnographic description, was all too brief. This is not as much a critique of the book as it is of the neoliberal

climate within which we all “produce.” Although this book examines urban schools and educational policy, the author herself, as a member of the academic community, works under the very same neoliberal moon. The same neoliberalism that arguably drives educational policy and reform has led to public disinvestment in urban schools, is buttressed by a colorblind ideology (Lipman, 2011), and shapes our own scholarship in significant ways. Even as we work with great criticality, as the author has done, academia and academic publishing are subject to a seemingly inescapable neoliberal regime that has intensified production and competition and values quantification and efficiency over the timely, elaborated nature of serious intellectual work. This presents a particular threat to qualitative methodologies and ethnography in particular. However, neoliberalism is neither impervious nor immune to dismantling and must be challenged in conjunction with other oppressive discourses and systems that function to reproduce inequality under the guise of democracy.

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