

Book Review:
Rachel and Her Children:
Homeless Families in America
author Jonathon Konzol

I selected the book *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* written by Jonathon Konzol, because I do serve several homeless students in my classroom each year. I wanted a better understanding of what they face each and every day. What types of people fall victim to becoming homeless, what events lead to this state of being. This book focused on the day to day struggle of homeless families in New York, this easily could be related to homeless people all over the United States. The primary focus was on the shelters in New York, particularly the Martinque Hotel in downtown New York. According to the author most people think of homeless people as drug addicts, runaway teenagers, hobos, and alcoholics. This many times is the case, but the examples provided in this book demonstrated people that held steady jobs and were doing fine on their own. A few unfortunate events such as loss of jobs, severe illness, or fire set these people on to the streets. Once in the system they found it very difficult to rise above and break free of the welfare system.

As I thought about my students' parents at one time were doing fine, but then a series of events left them without a home, jumping from shelter to shelter. The parents are reluctant to discuss the incidents that brought them to this way of living, but with reassurance and positive relationships eventually they do open up. Knowing that parents are trying the best they can, it is still a struggle. The students arrive at school tired, hungry, and worried all the time. They are worried about where their next meal is going to come, will mom or dad be home when they get there from school, will they have a place to stay that night, and will the other students know they are homeless. I am surprised that any child is able to learn with these concerns on their minds, but with confidentiality and the respect from me, the teacher, I try to help my students feel welcomed and know they are in a safe place. I do go out of my way at times providing them snacks, knowing that the only meal they get is here at school. Some people may think of diversity as being race and ethnicity, but it can also be a family's social status.

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Students that have been born into or through unseen circumstances end up in the classification of poverty are part of our culture.

During 1985, New York only allowed a family of four \$270 for living allowance per month, however rent at most places was \$350. Instead of increasing the rent allowance to \$350 the city pays about \$2,000 a month to keep families in hotel shelters. The parents have a tremendous task at end, to try and find housing for their families each day or be evicted from the shelter. To me this makes NO SENSE! It would make more sense for the city to raise the rent allowance to \$350 a month for these families so they are able to find an apartment and get back on their feet. Without the city allowing this type of funding they are keeping these people, who not long ago were very similar to myself, in the system. What is that saying about our country? That instead of giving money to the families that need it, they would rather keep providing them with very little forcing them to stay in the system. Things may have changed from 1985, but there are still families that are homeless and need help. As a teacher it is my job to not turn away from these children, but to give them the best education they possibly can have. It does create diverse needs within my classroom walls, but one that I am willing to rise to.

In the text the author quotes a women he was visiting she said, “Why don’t they figure out who’s here, who’s got some skills, who could help someone else? They look at us to see what isn’t there, and not what *is*. They see us like a lot of empty bottles that they don’t intend to fill. Listen! There are gifted people in this building. Why don’t they wake up?” She was referring to the city of New York, but as a teacher it is our responsibility to look at each child and see what is there, regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, and social class.

There are diverse groups of individuals Latinos, Mexican, African Americans, whites, and many more that are struggling each day to make it. This diversity does impact the role of a teacher, not only are we educators we turn into so much more to these children and their families. I have learned that they struggle way more than I ever thought they did, the requirements and expectations of them each and every day is astounding, the living conditions in which they reside is absurd, the lack of money for food and medical bills hinders their survival, and yet they continue to persevere each and every day.

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Work Cited:

Kozol, J. (1988). *Rachel and her children: Homeless families in America*. New York,
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