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Building a Community for Migrant Education Services through Family Literacy and Farm Worker Outreach

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Abstract

Cultural and linguistic differences within the migrant population, coupled with the transient nature of these families, often present challenges that can inhibit the education of migrant students in our schools. How can schools and communities come together to provide resources and services for this vulnerable population? Through the theoretical lens of Paulo Freire, we identify the need to work against the current educational trend toward increased standardization and work towards a model of education that is both individualized and democratic. For migrant students, individualizing educational experiences often means reaching out to the families for linguistic support. We have found the current services and resources available to students and families in Michigan to be fragmentary at best, and absent at worst. Our vision is to create a resource center for migrant families at Western Michigan University that focuses on literacy outreach initiatives for all ages, thus potentially filling a desperate need.

There is a story told by a friend who worked in a migrant summer education program in Michigan. As the teacher responsible for early elementary children, she was puzzled by two little girls who came to school on alternate days. Luisa came Monday, Marissa came Tuesday, and then the pattern repeated. When Deb, the teacher, probed gently, she found out that the girls had only one pair of shoes between them. The family did not want to bother the school with this need, so Deb found a way to provide an extra pair of shoes for the girls. After that, both came to school together for the remainder of the summer. A simple, respectful gesture such as this enabled a family to accomplish a small goal of sending their children to school with some basics so often taken for granted.

The Big Picture

This story is all too common in our state of Michigan and beyond. Migrant farm workers, people with rich knowledge of agriculture, strong family values, and a desire for a better life, move from place to place seeking the work they know best. Many migrant workers speak Spanish as a first language. This language difference is one of the primary challenges to migrants themselves as they interact with educators and others in the communities where they live. Often, they have limited education and do not know the nuances of navigating the school system.

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Although they are frequently marginalized in American society and our educational system, migrant farm workers represent a significant and important part of our population. With their cultural and linguistic differences, migrant families present a challenge that is very real but ripe with potential to enhance the learning—and community—in our schools and beyond. Deciding where to start, how to maintain momentum, and what resources are lacking can be a struggle for educators. This is a task, however, that schools and communities must undertake to include this most vulnerable population. Our overarching project does just that. In an effort to build a center at an institution of higher education that focuses on family literacy, we hope to fill a gap that currently exists in our geographic region. The study begins with Michigan as the focus, but will generate results with application to 38 other states with migrant education programming in areas of educational services, resources, programming, and policy.

Who Are Migrant Workers?

We first needed to identify the migrant population here in Southwest Michigan and situate it within the context of migrant labor in the United States. We looked at demographic information to achieve a collective and close-up picture of migrant farm workers. Migrant farm workers live throughout the United States, and educators in school districts far and wide are challenged to provide optimal educational opportunities for the children in these families. Here in Michigan, and across the nation, migrant farm workers comprise significant parts of local populations. Since these families' livelihoods derive from harvesting a variety of crops, they move frequently in order to remain employed. Migrant farm workers are a resource vital to the nation's agricultural industry, and they are part of many rural communities. Yet the educational progress of their children greatly lags behind mainstream standards. These children, many of whom speak little or no English, may attend as many as three schools in one academic year as families travel from worksite to worksite. Still other families "settle out," remaining in a community and working in agricultural-related jobs when they can. Literacy education and language support opportunities are limited for all these families.

On a broad scale, the United States has more than three million farm workers, who fall into one of two categories: migrant workers or seasonal workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). Migrant farm laborers travel from place to place harvesting various crops, working about five months a year. Seasonal workers, on the other hand, remain in one location, often working ten months a year. The average income for a migrant family is approximately \$17,000, well below the poverty level, and migrants often work in unsafe, unclean conditions (Passel, 2005). The needs of the migrant population are great; healthcare, family services, language and communication, as well as combating prejudices range among the most pressing concerns. Many of these migrant workers are Latinos and this population is underserved. Based on Census information, it is estimated that Latinos made up about 13% of the total United States population in 2000 (Marrotta & Garcia, 2003), and this number continues to rise.

According to a recent state survey conducted by the Michigan Interagency Migrant Service Committee (Larson, 2006), there are 90,716 migrant and seasonal farm workers and non-farm workers in Michigan who support the economy. The migrant economic contribution hits especially close to home in Southwest Michigan. The west side of Michigan, where Western

Michigan University (WMU) is located, is rich with farmland and orchards, offering jobs that often attract migrant workers. Because of this, west Michigan has a large population (relative to the rest of the state) of migrant families, and therefore migrant students. A number of counties in the service area of WMU have significant numbers of migrant and seasonal workers: Ottawa County with 6,030; Oceana County with 4,855; Van Buren County with 3,898; Berrien County with 3,365 and Kent County with 3,280. Despite these numbers, limited resources are made available to educators (Larson, 2006).

Resources and opportunities for students and their families are often fragmented, both from an educational standpoint and an auxiliary community support perspective. Funding for summer enrichment programs is on the decline due to state and federal budget constraints. One district might provide exceptional support for families, while another ignores their cultural and linguistic richness. Moreover, because these students' lives are transitory—many of them leave school in the late fall to travel south as their families seek work—teachers often have only a brief time in which to work with them. Consistency in social and educational development also becomes a difficulty for migrant students. School-aged children often do not build the kinds of relationships at school with teachers and peers that foster a successful education. In the public schools, we frequently see migrant students leave a district only to return again some months later. With this fragmentation in schooling, learning English can also be very difficult for migrant students because many schools (especially schools that rarely see migrant students) lack the appropriate resources and programs for English language learners, and Spanish is often the main language spoken in the home of migrant families. Basic resources such as children's books and writing materials are often hard to come by for families in these settings (Romanowski, 2003).

Numerous barriers prevent educators from implementing creative pedagogy and working more closely with families. These barriers include administrative pressures, standardized testing requirements, as well as lack of autonomy, flexibility and resources in the classroom. As a result, the potential exists for schools to isolate and marginalize students and families with limited English skills. In order to extrapolate the effects of this marginalization and to develop strategies for combating it, we applied social/pedagogical theory to the situation of the migrant student.

Critical Perspectives

Although multiple theoretical lenses are available and applicable, we value most that of Paulo Freire (1996, 1997), whose life was devoted to empowering the disenfranchised. One particular quote from Freire (1997) hits home for us as he describes the larger social context in which oppressed persons—migrant farm worker children and their families—exist:

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically [...] The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation [...] between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. (p. 30)

The duality faced by migrant farm workers and their children is evident. Because of their poverty they are denied access to a lifestyle that enables them to become part of the mainstream society. Their language and cultural background are seen as a lesser commodity by the dominant class, leading to their marginalization on many levels. The alienation these individuals experience is the direct result of society's stratified social structure based on class and race/ethnicity.

A major theme of Freire's work is the premise that "all education is political and thus schools are never neutral institutions" (Solorzano, 1989, p. 218). Freire's "banking method" (1997) is the metaphor frequently used for describing the function of schools as agents for maintaining the status quo where teachers impart their knowledge to students who passively "learn." Migrant farm workers digress from the white, middle class norm. As such they are implicitly expected to conform to the standards of white, middle-class America. In the case of migrant children, the white, middle-class values reflected in the curriculum only serve to alienate and denigrate their culture. The economic gap between the migrant children and their middle class peers is only emphasized.

Common challenges faced by migrant farm worker families navigating the territory of schooling are magnified by language barriers, limited community stays, and overall lower family educational achievement. As a result, services and opportunities for these students and their families are often fragmented, both from an educational standpoint and auxiliary community support perspective. Exacerbating this issue are changes in mandated educational objectives, such as *No Child Left Behind*, which continue to deplete the necessary resources to allow the migrant child to be successful in the education system.

Democratizing education has long been the goal of many English educators and scholars, but our current governmental mandates do not allow us to follow that path. Unfortunately, too often giving students "equal opportunities" to succeed is equated with giving the same opportunities to each student. As Susan Ohanian (2001) suggests in her book *One Size Fits Few*, flexibility is "what school should be about: Teachers and curriculum being flexible enough to meet the needs of each students, not shoving every kid through some distant committee's phantasmic pipe dream of a necessary curriculum for tomorrow's workforce" (p. 2).

Migrant students especially would benefit from a more individualized and less generalized curriculum. Their lives are so fragmented with the transiency of place; the different expectations of schools in different states only magnify that fragmentation. Depending on a student's background, familiarity with the dominant culture, level of poverty, and exposure to language early in life, one student may need little or no extra assistance on classroom assignments, whereas another student may need significant extra help, or perhaps an alternative assignment, in order to meet the same expectation. This should not mean that the first student succeeds in school, graduates with honors and goes on to become a CEO of a corporation, while the second student struggles in school, eventually drops out, and is limited to wage labor jobs. Ohanian (2001) recognizes that providing equal opportunities for all students means minimizing our focus on standards-based, test-centered curriculum: "When we talk about standards, we need to recognize the real issues. In the end, the standards are not just about curriculum; the standards are about social justice" (p. 113). Our educational system should be able to identify the variability in our students and recognize the necessity to find ways to help *all* students, not only the ones who fit our predetermined model of a student.

In his recent book *Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones*, education advocate and scholar Thomas Newkirk (2009) weighs in on this topic as well: “A rationalized, consistent, centralized, uniform system of instruction is incredibly attractive [...] Yet standardization only leads to sameness, not necessarily quality, and rarely to excellence” (pp. 8-9). Unfortunately, sameness does not serve a public whose fundamental needs are anything but uniform. One of the strongest arguments in favor of standards is based on the idea that a set of uniform requirements will raise the level of expectations for schools lagging behind the best. Because the process disproportionately rewards success, not only do lagging schools not necessarily “catch up” through this system, many fall farther behind. The present system does not take into account the varying resources and teaching tools available to a wide array of school districts.

Energy and time that could be spent creating lessons that will help both marginalized and mainstream students succeed in school, is instead spent on the bureaucracy of standards-based curriculum checklists and test preparation. Newkirk terms this “educational clutter” (p. 11). Rushing through a list of standards and benchmarks in order to “cover” everything required does little to create a classroom environment where students’ needs are prioritized. Since our ability to change the foundation of our educational system is not as strong as our ability to provide auxiliary educational help for marginalized students, specifically migrant students, we believe that we can have the most success working with the students and their families. Indeed, the theoretical lens with which we meet this challenge views empowerment organically, beginning with the family so that a foundation of literacy is built within the home.

Our Own Perspectives

As educators with a long history of working with and advocating for disenfranchised students we are relatively new to the unique needs of farm workers. Karen Vocke embarked upon a research quest to learn what support services exist for migrant workers in 2002 when she came to WMU. As a secondary English teacher for seven years, Karen’s colleague Amanda Stearns has directly witnessed the alienation of students within the secondary schools in western Michigan. She came to this project with a determination to help underserved students and provide educational access to all students, regardless of their backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses or assimilation into the dominant culture. The process has come almost full circle as a coalition of university and community educators has come together to explore the ways in which WMU can support the migrant population in Southwest Michigan.

Our research and pedagogical experience have revealed that the current trend in today’s educational setting is toward standardization, and marginalized students often have a range of needs that are not met. These students are not a priority in our educational setting, and the movement toward standardizing curriculum situates us further away from helping them. While a standards-based philosophy has become all-important in building curriculum, it only serves to move us away from democratizing education and providing the opportunities that students need. Helping these students succeed is what motivates us to pursue this project, and what we envision is a resource that would help to empower students through a medium that is often ignored: the family.

We believe, fundamentally, that if we can empower a family with literacy then we empower the student. We asked ourselves, specifically, how can we help migrant families in Southwest Michigan through literacy initiatives? Our desire to bring together the disparate service and educational factions from around this part of the state posed something of a dilemma, ultimately resulting in our primary research question: What services are available to migrant farm worker students and their families, and how well do these services meet the unique needs of these people?

The Journey Itself

This proved to be a huge question and massive undertaking. What can be said about the educational and literacy resources currently available to migrant students in Michigan? Our first task was to identify what kind of resources are already in place. We began this research with the Michigan Department of Education website (<http://www.michigan.gov/mde>). This initial step allowed us to ascertain which districts were allocated state government funds for migrant education programs. Because no comprehensive list of migrant education resources exists in Michigan, the process of establishing what resources are currently offered was tedious, yet necessary. It required examining numerous school district websites, university websites, and making several phone calls to state and local migrant education directors. Through our research we found that, at best, the services are fragmented; at worst, the services are absent. Resources such as literacy support (both for migrant families and for school-age children) and other academic support are provided by local schools, churches, grass-roots organizations, government, and occasionally, by universities. The resources offered include everything from providing age-appropriate books to hosting family literacy events. Additionally, we found that many resources also focus on healthcare necessities like medications and dental care, but this is not an area that universities typically handle.

In Michigan many school districts offer summer programs, family literacy events, and Head Start/Even Start programs. A number of these programs are located on the western side of the state. The focus in the public school programs tends to be on the early years, with an emphasis on elementary-aged children. As to higher education, adult students and first-year college students are aided by two main government-funded programs. Those programs are HEP and CAMP, the former focusing on helping adult migrant workers (18 or older) earn their GEDs, and the latter helping first-year college migrant students navigate the university during that first year. Currently, a limited number of institutions in Michigan offer migrant programs other than these governmentally funded ones. While all of these programs provide much needed help to many students, there is a wide gap in the services; the students between elementary-aged and college-aged have far fewer resources. We see the need to serve this neglected subpopulation where the governmental funding lapses.

We hope that Western Michigan University will join the list of migrant initiatives in our state. Significant needs still exist, and few new programs have been created in the last eight years, especially in our state. We found that often the creation of new programs is balanced by the termination of other programs, perhaps due to declining or temporary funding. We also found that a critical look at university programs nationwide is lacking; it is difficult to discern which

universities provide resources, as the information is often buried deeply within the universities' websites.

Since much of our research points to the success of literacy requiring family support, we believe our strongest potential for reaching students is to provide varied family literacy resources. Although some of the existing family literacy resources found are corporate and charge fees, there are other non-profit, free resources as well. These are the ones we will turn to as our model. For example, the National Institute for Literacy, The National Center for Family Literacy and the Goodling Institute (housed in the Education department at Penn State) focus on reading instruction for readers of all ages, reading and writing for meaning (from newspapers, letters, computers), and providing reading material. In all we found twenty family literacy programs listed for Michigan on the National Center for Family Literacy website. They include Toyota programs (elementary programs), district-level-directed and school-related programs (for all grade levels), and church- and library-housed programs. None of these family literacy programs are affiliated with a higher education institution, however, which leaves a gap that we hope to address with the creation of a resource center at WMU from where educational support to migrant families and students in our surrounding communities can be provided.

Our focus has gained momentum with the ongoing research into the fundamentals of family literacy programs. To begin the process of proposing a center, we needed to define the services we sought to provide. Family literacy services are defined by the federal government in several pieces of legislature, including the Workforce Investment Act, No Child Left Behind, the Community Serviced Block Grant Act, and the Head Start Act as:

services that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family and that integrate all of the following activities:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
- Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
- Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences. (No Child Left Behind, 2002)

While this definition encompasses functional aspects—the interactions between parents and children—we also need to consider more specifically the overarching structure of any such program. A more in-depth overview of family literacy programming is provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service (2000) in the following definition:

A family literacy program addresses the literacy needs and barriers of children and their families with a comprehensive plan. This practice, by Family Support America (formerly the Family Resource Coalition), recommends designing a family literacy program by identifying the components of such a program, the criteria on which those components are based, and reviewing other family literacy program models.

Our own goal is to follow this process in myriad ways. We need to examine in greater depth the types of literacy programs current in place in Michigan and beyond, but, more importantly, we need to examine the efficacy of such programs.

Family literacy must be situated in various contexts. Specifically, family literacy:

- is conceptualized around the needs and concerns of the family, in contrast to serving individual family members in isolation
- contains an educational component which formally or informally affects the child's literacy or development
- contains an educational component for the adult, providing both literacy activities and parenting education to enable adults to attain proficiency in basic skills
- includes at least one activity focusing on the exchange of knowledge and information between the adult and the child
- is developed based on community needs and participant recommendation. (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2000)

Beyond Initial Questions

Two important challenges have emerged from this research process. First of all we need to find out how we can foster the structure and function of our own family literacy programming in a way that will adhere to the most basic tenets of Paulo Freire's philosophy. Secondly, we need to determine how can construct and foster programming that will empower and provide migrant families with literacy resources that will reduce their marginalization and situate them more in the center of effective educational programming.

A comprehensive program that promotes democratic, empowering resources is our goal. One of the major challenges to this goal lies within ourselves. As we have continued to network and forge alliances, we have noticed the hesitancy of some service providers and agency leaders to share the vision of a comprehensive, equity-based program. This is inherent in any system, and many paradigm shifts are needed for future success. We believe that by providing and explaining this vision and model to stakeholders we will rally others to join the democratic approach to literacy and education that we envision. Paulo Freire still provides the exemplary model we seek, and we seek to do this in its most genuine form.

One of Freire's (1997) principal concepts is *problem-posing education*, in which individuals examine their circumstances and become empowered to uncover the social, economic, and political contradictions in their lives through a process of praxis. *Praxis* is a continual reflexive process between thought and action. Individuals reflect upon their actions, and this reflection is pivotal to framing both thought and action in the future. This reflective process is designed to uncover the contradictions in the social condition, specifically contradictions that come from capitalism. Ultimately, the sequence of the action, reflection, and action based on that reflection strives toward a critical consciousness through collective action. No one individual has this

power. Rather, individuals together have the power to reflect and act upon their circumstances (Freire, 1997). We believe that by participating in this process, migrant farm workers have potential to expand their own literacies and to bring their knowledge and culture more into the mainstream of American education.

An example of the process and outcome of the philosophy of problem posing education is presented in Freire's work *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1996), in which he describes the process of *conscientização*, through which individuals experience varying levels of consciousness to achieve the desired critical consciousness: "*Conscientização* represents the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness. It will not appear as a natural byproduct of even major economic changes, but must grow out of a critical educational effort based on favorable historical conditions" (Freire, 1996, p. 19, italics in original). With the nationwide demographic shift to an increased Latino population in future decades, we believe that historical conditions may lead us to our goal.

Critical awareness can happen despite current economic conditions; it is the history we very much need to consider, a history of education that is top-down, imposed by larger entities that have little understanding of the nuances of the children and families served. Education must be organic and democratic. It is our hope that we have begun this process through our own emerging critical awareness and activism for the disenfranchised. Our schools must foster pedagogy that is inclusive and culturally responsive. Communities must reach out to their more marginalized members. We hope that no child will ever have to miss school again merely for a lack of shoes and that no migrant family will ever have to feel ashamed to ask for help they so highly deserve.

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Karen Vocke teaches courses in language, literacy, and pedagogy at Western Michigan University. Her commitment to issues of social justice and advocacy stems from her early teaching experiences with farm workers and language minority students.

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