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VOICES FROM THE FIELD: INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS FROM MIGRANT FARMWORKER FAMILIES

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Note: Every attempt has been made to maintain the integrity of the printed text. In some cases, figures and tables have been reconstructed within the constraints of the electronic environment.

Despite long, hard hours spent toiling in the sun, migrant workers are among the poorest groups of people in this country with incomes at or below poverty level. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's Hired Farm Work Force Survey, migrant farm workers fit this definition:

persons 14 years and older who crossed county lines and stayed overnight to do hired farm work at any time during the year. Also included are persons who had no usual place of residence and did hired farm work in two or more counties during the year. (Whitener 1985, p. 3)

In general, migrant farm workers average 191 days of farm work a year; the rest of the time is spent either looking for work or working in other temporary jobs. The implications of limited economic conditions are many and are revealed in every aspect of migrants' lives. On the one hand, migrant families are often forced to live in substandard housing that provides minimum or no cooking accommodations and where refrigeration is nonexistent. Lack of refrigeration makes it impossible to keep meat or milk, essential elements for the healthy growth of children who are often the most severely affected by the migratory lifestyle and whose economic contribution is sometimes vital for the family's survival.

Migrant children move as often as three to five times during one academic year. Economic hardships as well as educational gaps place migrant children at risk to drop out of school before graduation. In an effort to help alleviate some of the problems caused by mobility, the federal government has created a series of support services for migrant students nationwide generally known as Migrant Education Programs. Despite efforts to help migrant students attain an education, migrant children are still struggling to stay in school. For example, according to the Florida Department of Education, between the years 1984-1985 approximately 56% of migrant students in 1st grade and 62% of those who remained in school until the 12th grade were below grade level. During the 1990-91 school year these figures dropped to 32% of students one year behind and 11% two or more years behind. It is estimated that migrant students continue to have the highest dropout rate of any group of students in the country.

Migrant students drop out of school for various and complex reasons. Although academic performance and grade retention are often cited as the primary causes of students' decisions to drop out of school, Guffain (1991, p. 20) found that migrant students who left school before graduation had a higher number of at-risk

indicators than those who graduated. He reported that the average number of school changes for those students who dropped out were 17.5 versus 10.3 for those who graduated. Similarly, students who had dropped out attended 72.7% of the time when compared to 90% for those who graduated. In addition to frequent school changes and low school attendance, other factors that affect migrant students include poor grades and age-grade discrepancies.

In addition to mobility, these factors also affect a child's performance: poverty, culture, language difference, poor health, and a lack of self-esteem. Chan and Rueda (1979) suggest that poverty and cultural background act as environmental agents that affect educability. Poverty affects academic performance by causing subnutrition or the inability of the body to function normally, a condition that can be corrected by better nutrition (Chan & Rueda, 1979). The culture of migrant agricultural employment may provide an excellent illustration of the cultural discontinuity theory proposed by Jacob and Jordan (1987) as a contributor to school failure.

Ogbu (1987) suggests that minority school failure is a combination of school and societal factors. Societal forces contribute by establishing what Ogbu (1987) refers to as "job ceilings" (p. 318) or by denying minorities the opportunity to obtain better paying jobs. According to Ogbu (1987), "by denying [minorities] adequate rewards for their education in terms of wages, American society discourages minorities from investing time and effort into pursuit of education and into maximizing their educational accomplishments" (p. 318). Schools have also contributed to minority students' failure according to Ogbu (1987) because they are guided by Anglo, middle class, American norms which result in low expectations of minority students from teachers and other school personnel.

Self-esteem, also closely associated with academic performance, is defined as "*a subjective value judgement that a person makes about his or her personal worth. It consists of a combination of thoughts and feelings toward the self and the overall experience of cohesiveness and well being*" (Garbarino, et al. 1989, p. 20). Although the term subjective refers to the individual's perception without external influence, external circumstances do influence the way we sometimes think of ourselves. According to Morse (1989), "school success is brought about by good self-esteem, whereas low self-esteem is a characteristic of dropouts" (p.2). Low self-esteem may be the result of cultural or religious beliefs, and it may also be the result of low expectations from teachers and other school personnel.

Low expectations can be part of students' self-image, or it can be promoted by school personnel. Research (Guffain, 1991) has shown that migrant students' self esteem is at the lowest during the 9th grade which is when the majority of migrant students drop out.

Although much attention has been focused on the migrant farm workers' struggle to survive in a hostile environment, little research has been conducted to examine the effects of mobility, poverty, cultural discontinuity, and low self esteem on migrant youths' school experience. The purpose of this study was to conduct in-depth interviews with a large number of migrant students to obtain personal accounts of their lives focusing on family and school backgrounds as well as their goals and aspirations. The intent was to obtain a better understanding of the migrant student experience from the perspective of the migrant students themselves.

Method

The study was conducted by in-depth structured interviewing. A total of 84 students were interviewed in eighteen schools in four counties. Of these, forty two were male and forty-two female. Over 80% were of

Hispanic origin, 10% Anglo, and 8% African American (see Table 1).

Table 1. Ethnicity, race, and gender of population interviewed

	#	%
Hispanic males	36	43
Hispanic females	34	40
Anglo males	3	4
Anglo females	5	6
African American males	3	4
African American females	3	4
Total	84	

The age of the students interviewed ranged from six to nineteen. Of the 84 students interviewed, 61% were born in the United States, and the other 39% were born in Mexico. Approximately 86% were migrating while 7% were less mobile and would be considered status two migrant students under federal guidelines.

The survey instrument was comprised of 95 questions divided into several sections. The purpose of each section was to obtain information on specific aspects of each youth's life: family, housing, language spoken at home, work history, health, recreation, school, self-esteem, goals, and vocational aspirations.

The first section of the interview, the identifier section, was designed to build rapport between the student and the interviewer. It was also a way to obtain basic information from each student such as age, grade level, nationality, migrant status, and language spoken at home.

The family and housing sections were designed to provide information about the number of people living in each household and the housing conditions of each family. The work history section solicited information regarding students' work history. The primary aim was to find out if the students had ever worked in the fields, and if so, what kinds of crops they had picked and the number of hours worked on a weekly basis. In addition, we wanted to find out students' attitudes toward various types of field work.

The intent of the health section was to obtain general information about the students' health and about the health problems that affect the migrant population. The school section was designed to assess students' attitudes toward school as well as some information about the students' reading and math achievement levels.

Students' vocational and career interests were examined through the Pictorial Inventory of Careers (PIC), an instrument which uses real life pictorials to measure vocational interest. Students were shown 119 pictures on a film strip format and asked to rate their interests on a five-point Likert scale format.

The final section of the survey was designed to obtain information on students' self-esteem and goals. For the self-esteem section a modification of the Kaplan Self-Derogation Test (Kaplan & Pokorny, 1969) and the Rosenberg Self Esteem Test (Rosenberg, 1965), designed by the National Adolescent and Child Treatment Survey Team at the Florida Mental Health Institute, were used. For this section ten statements, one at a time, were read to each student who was asked to respond to one of five Likert scale choices.

The survey instrument was piloted with migrant students attending the federally funded High School Equivalency Program (HEP) at the University of South Florida and with migrant students at one of the

middle schools in a county adjacent to the university.

State and local school district approval to conduct the interviews was obtained. Then the migrant advocates and recruiters served as the primary school contacts. Through them, we asked to interview high, middle, and elementary school migrant students of high, middle, and low academic achievement, and preferably status one students, that is, students whose parents travelled across state lines seeking seasonal agricultural work. Informed consent was obtained from each parent, and each child was given an opportunity to voluntarily participate in the interviews.

The interviews for each student lasted approximately one hour and thirty minutes. The interviews were conducted in the student's language of preference: Spanish or English. Seven of the 84 students or 8% were interviewed in Spanish.

The students were interviewed in private rooms with a minimum of interruptions. In addition, students were assured that the information they provided would be held confidential. Upon completion of the interview each student was allowed to select a book as a sign of appreciation for participation.

Results

Family and Housing

Approximately 82% of the 84 students interviewed reported that Spanish was the primary language spoken at home. However, in 68% of the homes some English was spoken. Of the 82% who spoke Spanish as a home language, 32% spoke only Spanish, and 50% were bilingual, that is, they spoke both English and Spanish at home. However, 40% of the fathers and 43% of the mothers were non-English speakers, compared to 21% of the fathers and 22% of the mothers who could speak, read, and write English. The average number of children in the households of the students interviewed was 5.4 with a range of 1 to 15 children.

When asked to compare the place where they were currently living to other places they had lived, 44% of the students said that where they currently live is good, 38% said that it was better than other places, while 14% said it was not as good. Approximately 12% of the students' parents owned the home where they live, and 32% owned a house somewhere else.

In addition to reporting better living conditions, 93% of the students reported that they came from homes where both the mother and the father were present. In 2.3% the mothers had died, and 4.7% were female headed households. For the four students whose fathers did not live at home, two were from Anglo backgrounds, one was African American, and one was Mexican American.

For those students whose fathers were home 54% of the fathers picked crops, 10% functioned as crew leaders, and 1% worked as agricultural drivers for a total of 65% of the fathers actively involved in agricultural work at the time of the study. Only 2.5% were not employed. For the mothers, 33% worked in agriculture related jobs, mainly picking, and 29% worked in other types of jobs. Approximately 29% were housewives, and 7% were unemployed due to disability caused by accidents in the field.

Child's Work History

Of the 84 students interviewed, 75% had worked or were working in the fields, while 25% had never

worked in the fields. The average age of those who had not worked in the fields was 10.8 years with a range of 6 to 17. When asked what their favorite crop to pick was, 52% of the students said they either did not have one or none, 10% said tomatoes, and 6% said strawberries. Similarly, the students were asked which was their least favorite crop to pick to which 39% responded that they did not have one, 12% responded oranges, and 8% said tomatoes. The remainder of the students gave various responses. The students were also asked about which of the crops they had picked paid the best. The majority, about 49%, said they did not know.

Health

The health section asked a series of questions designed to assess the students' health status and health-related school absences. The study found that 2% missed school very often because of health reasons, 20% more than average, 13% average, 33% were rarely sick, and 31% were never sick. Students were also asked if they ever missed school for other reasons besides health problems. Approximately 48% of them said "yes." They were then asked what other reasons besides being sick caused them to miss school. Of the students who responded to the question, 58% said they missed school to translate for their parents, 25% to watch over younger siblings, 7% to work, and 7% for other reasons.

Approximately 33% of the students said that they had been told by a doctor that they had to wear glasses. Of these, 54%, or a little over half, received the glasses. About 21% said that they had earaches or ear problems, and 87% said that their hearing was good. When asked if they had any dental problems, 13% of the students said they did.

The students were asked if their parents or siblings had health problems that they knew about. Approximately 29% responded that a parent suffered from health problems, and 18% mentioned a sibling having a specific health problem. Students cited high blood pressure (29%), back problems (17%), and heart problems (12%) as the health problems which afflicted their parents. For their siblings, the students mentioned heart problems (27%), asthma (20%), and allergies (20%).

School

An overwhelming 96% of the students surveyed said they liked school. Of these, 42% indicated that they liked "to learn," 21% said that it was "fun," 16% said it was a way to "improve the way of life," 12% liked it because they could be with their friends, 6% liked school for other reasons, and 2% did not respond.

As with Guffain's (1991) study we found an age-grade discrepancy in the students we surveyed. Figure 1 shows a distribution of normal age by grade and the age by grade of the students surveyed. On the average all of the children surveyed were older than what is expected for their grade level. However, after the 8th grade the age-grade discrepancy increases with the greatest age-grade discrepancy between the 9th and the 10th grade. After the 10th grade the age grade discrepancy starts to decrease again.

Figure 1. Average Age by Grade Level.

(FIGURE COULD NOT BE INCLUDED)

For the students surveyed, the average age-grade discrepancy is 1.77 years. These data are consistent with Guffain's (1991) study which shows that the average age-grade discrepancy of the dropout students in his study was 1.75, and that migrant students tend to drop out between the 9th and 10th grades.

Students were asked if they could remember a teacher who had been extra nice to them during their school career. Extra nice was explained as someone who had gone out of the way to do something for the student. About 89% of the students answered that they could remember such a person, 8% said that they had never had such a teacher, and 2% did not respond. In addition, students were asked if they could remember a teacher who had not been nice ("que no haya sido bueno") in the sense of a person who had mistreated them. For this question 38% of the students answered that they had such a teacher while 58% said "no." Although the majority of the students remember having had teachers who had gone out of their way to help them, over a third of them also remember having had a teacher who had not.

When asked if teachers treated them fairly, 95% of the students said "yes." However, when asked if teachers treated Hispanics, Mexicans, or Blacks differently, 31% said "yes" while 61% said "no."

Self-Esteem and Future Life Goals

Self-esteem was surveyed for 3rd-12th graders. The nature of the survey questions was not felt to be appropriate for the younger students. No significant differences were found between self-esteem and gender of participants. A significant relationship was, however, found between self-esteem and grade level with high school students having the highest self-esteem levels and elementary students the lowest. As depicted in Figure 2, a sharp decrease in self-esteem occurs at grade 8, a grade at which many migrant students drop out of school. Also, for students who remained in school, self-esteem levels peak at grade 12 when students are feeling good about having reached their goals. A significant relationship also was found between self-esteem and reading ability with poor readers reporting significantly lower self-esteem than good readers.

Figure 2. Self-esteem by Grade Level.

(FIGURE COULD NOT BE INCLUDED)

In an effort to examine long-range goals, the students were asked what they hoped to be doing at 18 and 25 years of age. At age 18, 30% responded that they would like to be in college, 27% said working, 21% did not know, 14% responded that they would still be in high school, and 7% gave various other responses. When asked what they would like to be doing at age 25, 45% responded that they would like to be working, 43% did not know, 8% said college, and 10% gave various responses. These responses were self-generated, that is, the students were not limited by the choices in a checklist. To help account for the high number of no responses, we analyzed the elementary and high school students' responses separately. Twenty-four percent of the elementary school students were not sure what they would like to be doing at age 18 versus 19% of the high school students. Furthermore, 43% of the elementary school students did not know what they would like to be doing at 25 versus 19% of the high school students.

Pictorial Inventory of Careers

Responses to the vocational orientation section of the interview revealed that both males and females ranked agricultural work as their second to last choice for future employment (12.1% of the females and 12.9% of the males). The number one choice for males was criminal justice, with mechanical and fire service as the second and third. Females ranked service/personal as their number one choice for a career with secretarial and data processing jobs. They also placed agricultural jobs as second to last.

Discussion

In general, the study's contribution to the limited information available on migrant children and youth is twofold. First, some of the information obtained is consistent with what is known about school-age children from low socioeconomic and different cultural backgrounds. Second, it provides a child/youth-centered view of what has been termed the "culture of migrancy."

As reported, Spanish was the primary language spoken at home, although approximately 50% of the homes where Spanish was spoken were bilingual. Although it is difficult to establish the exact reasons for the high number of bilingual homes, one possible answer is the large number of students born in the U.S. (61%) which can indicate second or third generation migrants. Another reason is that many Hispanic migrant families are realizing that the easiest way to attain economic mobility in this country is to learn English.

The results also indicate the prevalence of large nuclear families among migrants. A possible reason is that traditionally, farming families have relied on their children's economic contribution for their survival. Tradition also plays an important role in the case of the Mexican American families. According to Moore (1970),

Mexican American families are extremely large. They are so large, in fact, as to make Mexican participation in the ordinary material rewards of American life much more marginal than that of most other populations.... No other category of people in the United States except the American Indian matches or approximates the typical Mexican American family size of 4.8 persons. Southwestern Anglos, for comparison, averaged 3.4 persons per family in 1960 and the nonwhites in the same region, 4.5 persons. (p. 57)

Although the students were not asked about their religious beliefs, religion is also an important factor in the size of the family.

In addition, 93% of the students reported living in homes where both parents were present. This differs from other low income families where more of the households are headed by a female. According to Reed and Sautter (1990, p.4), 56% of poor Black households are headed by a woman compared to 59% of poor Hispanic households. The Census Bureau reported in March of 1990 that "in 1989, 47.5% of Hispanic families in poverty were maintained by women, compared with 30.4% of non-Hispanic families in poverty" (Garcia & Montgomery 1990, p. 5). A possible reason is the need for true migrant families to form strong cohesive units in order to survive. It might also reflect the effects of tradition and religion as well.

Relative to students' work history, the study showed that 75% percent of the students interviewed had work experience and that age was not a determining factor. Despite legislation to keep children out of the fields, children as young as 6 years of age are still working in the fields. The results also show that over 50% of the students who reported working in the fields did not have a favorite crop, and almost 40% could not think of a least favorite crop. Although it is possible to assume that indeed the students could not think of one at that time, it seems more likely that the students could not think of a favorite or a least favorite because they have

no choice on the type of work they do. It is only a way of helping the family, something that has to be done.

Along the same lines, almost 50% of the students who reported working experience did not know which of the crops they have worked with paid the best. Once again, this is indicative that the students work in the fields as a way of helping their families not as a way of obtaining money for personal use as most youth who make money do. It could also indicate that this type of work is not commensurate with the type of pay received, and so they do not think that any pays well.

Two thirds of the students interviewed answered that they rarely missed school due to illness, but absenteeism among migrant students is quite high. The study indicates that almost 60% of the students miss school to translate for their parents.

The study indicates that migrant students like school. In addition, over half of the students remember having had a positive experience with teachers who went out of the way to help them. Regarding differential treatment by teachers, 95% of the students said they were treated fairly while 31% answered that Hispanics were treated differently than other students. The possible reason for the difference in the response is that students might perceive individual treatment differently from group treatment. Students might think that there is no differential treatment with them as individuals but that there is differential treatment as a group. Some of the students recalled a friend or cousin who had asked a teacher for permission to go to the bathroom and the teacher did not allow it, while permitting other (Anglo) students to go to the bathroom. However, some students, although a smaller number, answered that teachers treated them better than other students because they did not speak English. So, the differential treatment went both ways.

Responses on self-esteem reveal a marked difference by grade distribution and a nonsignificant difference due to gender.

Low self-esteem may be the result of cultural or religious beliefs, and it may also be the result of low expectations. According to Morse (1989), "expectations both positive and negative have a powerful effect on our own performance and the performance of others" (p.2). Furthermore, Morse (1989) points out that "Research indicates that language minority students who enter school with good self esteem, lose confidence in themselves as a result of the lower expectations they encounter in the school process" (p.2).

Looking at their responses could provide an interesting insight as to how their self-image differs from that of in-school migrant students. However, it is difficult to explain why self-esteem was comparatively high for 5th graders. For 6th through 9th graders self-esteem seems to be low mainly during the 9th grade. This data is consistent with Guffain's (1991) research which has shown that migrant students tend to drop out of school during the 9th grade. Self-esteem begins to rise again at the 10th grade. This could indicate that the students who have made it this far will make it to the end; they feel they have a good chance of graduating. It could also be due to attrition; students with low self-esteem have not made it this far.

However, we do not know if low self-esteem causes low academic achievement or if low academic achievement causes low self-esteem. We compared these results to low and high scoring students who had answered that they had a "bad" teacher and found that only 10% of high scoring students mentioned having a "bad" teacher while 40% of low scoring students mentioned having such a teacher. Although this cannot be used as conclusive data to describe the total U.S. migrant student population it is important for the group surveyed. Perhaps the low scoring students had teachers with low expectations or teachers who mistreated them which affected their self-esteem and as a consequence their school performance.

The life goals section revealed that migrant students do have interest in furthering their education. Although there were some "don't know" responses, the number was less for high school students. For those at the elementary level, the response is justifiable since not many eight year olds know what they hope to do in the future. However, we would have expected a smaller percentage for the "at age 18" responses. This could indicate the students' lack of expectations, perhaps because they feel that there is only one kind of work for them to do: farm work. It could also indicate a lack of vocational orientation at the school level; the students may not be aware of the types of jobs available. It could also indicate apathy on the students' part. Based on Ogbu's (1987) theory, the students may not care because they know that regardless of whether they finish school or not, they will never become economically secure.

The study found that the second to last liked occupation by the students surveyed was agricultural work. This is not surprising since other parts of the study revealed migrant students' lack of interest in this type of work.

Conclusions

The study revealed important aspects on migrant lifestyle and perceptions from a child/youth-centered point of view. Although migrant farm workers value education, children often confront obstacles that make it easy for them to drop out of school. Chief among these obstacles are mobility, poverty, hostile community attitudes toward them, and educators' preconceptions about migrant student academic performance.

Traditionally recognized, many problems are borne out by the information provided by these students in the interviews. Frequent and academically disruptive moves are common. Linguistic diversity, suggesting academic complications in most of the nation's schools, remains a defining element of migrant culture. Migrant children come, overwhelmingly, from large and intact families, families in which demanding work is another defining element of the culture. From the children's perspective, current housing conditions are generally seen as tolerable or improved when contrasted with past experiences. On the academic front these children expressed strong positive regard for school and for teachers. Self-image data are generally consistent with previous findings and generally held views. Analysis of these data, however, is complicated by the fact that the pool of migrant students available to be sampled in the middle to high school grades may not be fully representative of the migrant youth population.

The students' positive views expressed on the school experience should further strengthen efforts to offer migrant students special support services. They believe that they are treated fairly, and the vast majority can recall a teacher who was especially nice or helpful to them. These positives, however, may not be sufficient to counteract the heavy economic pressures working to make dropping out an attractive option for some migrant students.

What may be the most important contribution of this study is what we learned which is contrary or supplementary to the general wisdom related to migrant students. Migrant children still report working in the fields at high rates, and while they may not be working as often during school hours, they report frequently missing school for reasons other than for illness. Absence from school to assist parents in translating or otherwise negotiating the system presents an important and addressable barrier to academic achievement.

Vocational preferences provide, perhaps, the greatest surprise. Migrant students, overall, do not appear to like agricultural work. They have no strong preferences about the crops they like to pick and on the Pictorial Inventory of Careers, rank agricultural work among their least preferred occupational choices. Males and

females expressed clear differences in vocational preferences with females most likely to select service/personal careers and males to select careers in criminal justice. What should not be surprising here is that migrant students have career preferences far more similar to the nonmigrant population than to any idealized love-of-the-land vision some may wish to put forward on their behalf. Certainly, both public school and adult educators should understand the notion that migrant youth may not like agricultural work and should be encouraged, as with any student, to fully explore all career avenues.

This study also pointed to possible areas for future research that would further enhance our understanding of migrant children and young adults and their life experiences. How low expectations from school personnel affect self-esteem for migrant students is an important question that merits further study. In addition, a deeper understanding of the effects of students' responsibilities outside of school (i.e., to translate for parents, to care for younger siblings, etc.) would also provide implications for collaborative efforts with service agencies in the communities.

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