“Where Do I Go from Here?”

*Meeting the Unique Educational Needs of Migrant Students*

Karen S. Vocke
This book is dedicated to my husband, Jim, and
daughter, Amanda, who encouraged me at every turn.
Additionally, it is dedicated to migrant families in the
United States—hardworking, generous people who
deserve the best in education for their children.
Present-day migrant housing in southwest Michigan. Similar living conditions can be found throughout the U.S.
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Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of a journey that began when I met Willie Mae in the first grade; she was a migrant girl with whom I forged a brief friendship in my home state of Ohio. I never met her again, but I have been deeply affected by other migrant farmworkers I have met since then. It is my hope that the information and ideas presented in this book will be of value to educators who currently work with migrant children and families.

I want to thank colleagues and friends who contributed their beliefs, their ideals, and their commitment to social justice in our schools. Special thanks go to Matt Myres, Rebekah Rocha, and the other educators from the Windsor Unified School District in California for providing me with invaluable perspective and support during my time there; to Cheryl Boothby, Fendon Dankert, and other migrant educators at Hartford (Michigan) Public Schools; to Alice Huyser, migrant director of Fennville (Michigan) Public Schools, and her staff; to my colleagues at Western Michigan University for their ideas and support; to my ELL Connected teacher workshop group, an endeavor funded by the English Language Learner Network of the National Writing Project; and to the students in my university courses who engaged in ongoing dialogue about the migrant situation across the United States.

Very special thanks go to Lynn Welsch, an educator committed to migrant advocacy, who contributed a chapter to this book, and to Micki Garcia, a migrant recruiter who accompanied me on many visits into the community. The book has taken on significant dimension
because of her assistance. My editor, Maura Sullivan, has supported my becoming a better writer; working with her has been a joy. My production editor, Vicki Kasabian, is incredible; I have learned so much about the nuances of book production through her guidance. To my husband, Jim, and daughter, Amanda, I extend my appreciation for your thoughts and support.

Ultimately, though, it is the migrant farmworkers in the United States to whom I owe this acknowledgment. They are hardworking, family-oriented, generous people.
Several years ago I was a guest speaker in a number of high school Spanish classes in a wealthy suburban school district in northwestern Ohio. In my talks, I focused on migrant farmworkers, one of the most misunderstood populations in that part of the state. After describing the lives of the workers and their families, I asked the students what they thought a number of small buildings located along one of the area’s rural county roads were used for. After students had suggested “tractor and equipment storage” or “perhaps extra barn space,” I explained that the buildings were being used to house migrant farm laborers.

“You can’t mean that people actually live there?” one student stammered incredulously. “Those buildings are storage sheds for the big farm out there.”
“Not quite,” I replied. “That is where the workers who come up to harvest the crops live for part of the summer.”

Another student said, “One of my friends goes to a school east of Toledo, and he says that there are some kids who stay just until the end of October and then they go back to Texas or somewhere like that. Are those the kids you are talking about? Do they really live there?”

These were honest responses—none of these suburban teens knew much about the lives of the people upon whom America’s agricultural industry depends. In fact, some of them had never even heard of migrant farmworkers, and they were jolted by the realities of the workers’ lives. The truth is, very few people really know much about these temporary neighbors in their communities.

Migrant farm laborers 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. 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. Having taught and conversed with innumerable educators during my career, I understand their frustration. Teachers tell me that administrative pressures, standardized testing requirements, and ever larger class sizes greatly reduce their autonomy and flexibility in the classroom. Resources are often limited, and many of these teachers pay for additional course materials and supplies out of their own pocket. This environment can—and does— isolate students with limited English skills.

But many educators know the long-term benefits of an inclusive and diverse classroom and do what they have to in order to establish one. In these classrooms, schools, and communities, migrants are valued for their contributions to the local economy and for their work ethic. The common misconception that all migrant workers are undocumented immigrants must be dispelled. Many are U.S. citizens with inherent rights to work and live in the United States. But above all, migrant children and their families are participants in our schools, and as such, they deserve no less than our full commitment. As I tell my teachers in the making, it is vital to affirm each and every student in each and every class, no matter his background or circumstances. I tell them to leave their biases at the door.

From this perspective, teaching the children of migrant laborers presents a challenge that is very real but ripe with potential to enhance
the learning that takes place in our schools. Deciding where to start, how to maintain momentum, and what resources are needed can be a struggle. This book demonstrates how we can modify our curriculum and integrate activities that will help migrant students while they are in our classroom and after they leave it. It explains strategies and resources, suggests ways to connect with migrant families, and offers advice on how to advocate for these students. The first essential step is to understand the lives these children lead and the obstacles they face.

The Lives of Migrant Families

Migrant workers are often referred to as the invisible people because of their status as one of America’s most marginalized and under-educated populations. These families’ livelihoods derive from harvesting a variety of crops, and they move frequently in order to remain employed. Migrant farmworkers are a resource vital to the nation’s agricultural industry and 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 three or even more schools in one academic year as families travel from work site to work site. Still other families “settle out,” remaining in a community and working in agriculture-related jobs when they can.

The United States has between two and a half and three million hired farmworkers, who fall into one of two categories: migrant workers or seasonal workers (Barger and Reza 1994; Martin and Martin 1994). Migrant farm laborers travel from place to place harvesting various crops, working about five months a year; seasonal workers remain in one location, often working ten months a year. According to Martin and Martin (1994), the true migrant laborer population, those who follow the crops, is about three hundred thousand. These workers are “accompanied by about 115,000 children. A larger number of workers—perhaps 600,000—remain at one U.S. residence while they do farm work. They are accompanied by about 400,000 children” (3). Farmworkers frequently make well below the U.S. poverty level, for harvesting and processing food for consumers. The overarching

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statistics are jolting; even worse are the oppressive conditions under which migrant laborers live and work.

The transient, marginalized life of the workers has a deleterious effect on the family. After finding employment (which in itself is difficult), migrant farmworkers work long hours at low wages in marginal, sometimes abysmal, working and living conditions. I have seen migrant camps that do, indeed, consist of rows of one-room shanties, often with rotting wood foundations or resting on stone slabs, with toilet and shower facilities in a separate building. Occasionally, the families are housed in old, beat-up trailers. I have even read an account of one family’s accommodation in a converted chicken coop (Barger and Reza 1994). Conditions are primitive at best.

The fields they toil in are equally daunting, with rows and rows of crops spread over many acres. Although drinking water and restrooms are supposed to be readily available, these amenities may be few and far between. One source estimates that “64 percent of the migrant workers are not guaranteed fresh drinking water and washing or toilet facilities in the fields” (Helsinki Commission, cited in Martinez and Cranston-Gingras 1996, 29). Workers often have to contend with mud or oppressive heat; accidents involving farm equipment happen frequently; and pesticides used on crops are a very real health hazard. The seasonal nature of farmwork perpetuates the poverty cycle in which these people become so firmly entrenched (Barger and Reza 1994).

In addition to these indignities, wages of the migrant worker often are far below the minimum wage. According to a 2005 report from the U.S. Department of Labor, the median income for farmworker households was between $15,000 and $17,499. Thirty percent of farmworker households lived below the poverty level, and this number is increasing. Despite this pervasive poverty, many of these laborers are ineligible for social services because of their tenuous, and often uncertain, immigration status. Pride also causes them not to seek assistance even if they are eligible. Most workers are Hispanic, approximately 70 percent of them foreign-born, predominantly in Mexico. Workers from other Latin American and Caribbean countries are also entering the United States’ agricultural labor force. The children of migrant farmworkers receive a fragmented education, have only short-term relationships with teachers and friends, and do not become a permanent part of the larger community.

Migrant families move so much because it is the only way they can find employment. Sometimes they move about within a relatively

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small area; sometimes they travel very long distances, from as far as Texas to Michigan or up and down the Pacific coast. The driving force behind migration patterns is the availability of seasonal jobs; families move to keep up with the harvests in various parts of the country. There are three migrant streams, or patterns, in the United States: workers along the East Coast move between Florida and the other states along the Atlantic Ocean; workers in the Midwest travel largely between Texas and Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana; and the third stream of workers migrates along the West Coast. Thirty years ago, the patterns were more solidly established, but these days there is a lot more variation: families from Texas, for example, may travel to either the East or West Coast or both.

Martin and Martin (1994) describe the typical migrant worker as “a hardworking Hispanic who lives during the winter months in southern Florida, southern Texas, or central California. Every spring he packs up his family and follows the sun northward to harvest the ripening crops from New York to Michigan to Washington” (1). This picture is true to some extent. A recent study regarding Michigan, for example, found that the majority of migrant laborers were families (Larson 2006); however, another common demographic pattern across the United States is that men travel alone to find work, leaving their families behind in Texas or Mexico. In either case, the workers and their families are vulnerable as to both their living and working conditions; workers can also be subject to abuses by growers and crew leaders.

Migrants do not necessarily maintain this lifestyle by choice. Their oppressed status limits their ability to seek and evaluate viable work alternatives. Their lack of English proficiency and education often prevents them from getting more mainstream jobs. Government and social programs meant to help migrant workers transcend their conditions are too little, too late. One highly regarded work on the lives of migrant families purports that as “any particular family . . . moves up the job ladder, assistance personnel turn around to see another migrant family in need take their place” (Martin and Martin 1994, 2). Many migrant families do eventually settle in a particular community, but additional families regularly arrive in the United States seeking work. School systems must deal with students who come and go at varying times during the academic year; integrating migrant children into the classroom and larger community is immensely complex. The reality is that these transient children continue to be a significant

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portion of many rural school populations, and current educational practices must be changed to incorporate them.

Challenges Facing Migrant Children

Three key factors that impact the children of migrant families are lost school time because of frequent moves, limited ties to the community, and various types of discrimination—economic, social, and educational (Romanowski 2002). Migrant students may change schools three or more times a year, making it difficult to have any sort of continuity in the educational process. And according to the Research Institute (1992, as cited in Romanowski 2001), 25 percent of these students enroll in school more than thirty days after the beginning of the academic year. This inhibits students’ ability to form lasting bonds in their communities even more. These circumstances make it highly likely that the family will be ostracized in the community because of their language barriers and cultural practices.

The children of migrant farmworkers face a variety of economic, social, and educational challenges. Economically, most farmworker families subsist well below the poverty level, and their children are one of the most educationally deprived populations in the United States. Only 56 percent of U.S.-born migrant children are reported to achieve as high as a twelfth-grade education (U.S. Department of Labor 2005).

A number of factors affect the migrant child’s school experience: language, culture, ethnic identity, social class, location and mobility, peer influence, and family support. Language and culture are the dominant variables that impact the educational progress of migrant children. Latino children whose first language is Spanish have to contend with a school system that demands proficiency in English yet contradicts itself regarding the method of teaching it. Developing this proficiency is time-consuming: social language skills may develop in two years; academic language abilities may take as long as seven. As children gain proficiency in English as their second language, they can lose some of their fluency in Spanish. According to Henning-Stout, “The difficulty of gauging cognitive and academic status of migrant children in schools is significant given the complex nature of emerg-
ing bilingualism” (1996, 156). Language, intermingled with culture and socioeconomic factors, serves as the basis from which we view migrant farmworker families.

Also, community and a sense of tradition are critical elements of Latino culture. The transient nature of the migrant lifestyle and the lack of acceptance of Latino culture within the schools disrupt cultural continuity and validation and lead to the stigma of a label. Social class and frequent moves from location to location also affect the continuity of education. Migrant children typically do not stay in any given school long enough to make lasting friendships. They tend to be ostracized because of their cultural and linguistic differences. Parents want to support the efforts of their children, but they often lack the linguistic and cultural knowledge to interact within the school culture.

In addition, Ogbu (1987) suggests that teachers and other school personnel lower their expectations of minority students based on white, middle-class norms and thus contribute to these students’ failure by asking too little of them. Educators may also have little exposure to these children and families outside the classroom and often have preconceived ideas about their lives and their commitment to education. Romanowski (2002) suggests that cultural relevancy is an all-important factor in the education of migrant children. Providing an educational environment that is truly conducive to learning for these children means that teachers and administrators must have a solid understanding of the “less tangible, subjective dimensions, like ways of talking and socializing, values, and attitudes” (44). Teachers must understand the perspectives of these students and how their lives can often conflict with the school’s expectations, rather than make assumptions about migrant workers’ priorities.

Migrants possess a strong family bond. Mobility, which is paramount as a means both to seek honorable work and to keep the family together, conflicts with the dominant societal values in settled communities and school districts. The time a family spends in any given community may be brief, thus limiting the children’s educational opportunities and continuity. Migrant students can be marginalized physically and socially—seated in the back or on the side and discouraged from interacting with their classmates. Students with limited or no English proficiency make little progress in their academic careers, a scenario that is exacerbated when the family moves to yet another community.

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Serious conflicts can arise in schools when migrant students are mocked and derided with racial slurs. These students, compelled to defend their own honor and that of their family, are often labeled troublemakers, a designation that can follow them throughout their school career. Educators ignore the inherent internal conflict: students face the dishonor of their families or the dishonor of breaking the rules of the school, an institution they have made an effort to enter and succeed in despite substantial obstacles. A cycle of rejection is begun and perpetuated.

The Failure of Schools and Society

An even more critical barrier to the success of migrant children is the nature of school itself. The marginalization of migrant children is often the result of a disconnection between the family and the educators. Family involvement has always been stressed as essential to a successful education, but the typical school system is not equipped to overcome the hurdles presented in teaching migrant children. They speak a different language, both their parents spend long days working in the field, and they may be enrolled in a given school for only a few months. It’s easier to segregate them than to incorporate them into the system. Their failure to be part of the educational system often also excludes them from or marginalizes them in the community as a whole.

A quote from Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, in which he describes the larger social context in which oppressed persons—and by extension, migrant farmworker children and their families—exist, hits home:

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 oppressors 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. (1997, 30)

The duality faced by migrant laborers and their children is evident. Because of their poverty they are denied access to a lifestyle that enables...
them to become part of mainstream society. Their language and cultural background are marginalized by the dominant class. The alienation they experience is the direct result of society’s stratified social structure, based on class and race and ethnicity.

A major theme of Freire's work is the premise that “all education is political and thus schools are never neutral institutions” (Solorzano 1997, 351). Freire’s banking method metaphor (1997) is frequently used to describe schools as agents for maintaining the status quo, as places in which teachers impart their knowledge to students, who passively learn. Migrant farmworkers depart from the white, middle-class norm and are implicitly expected to conform to the standards of white, middle-class America. In the case of migrant children, the standard values reflected in the curriculum alienate and denigrate their culture. The economic gap between the migrant children and their middle-class peers is emphasized.

School culture is geared toward middle- and upper-class values. Even more so, the curriculum has long reflected a white-dominant perspective. In keeping with this perspective, language becomes an issue that alienates migrant children who don’t speak English. Some programs advocate English only in the classroom, and bilingual education programs are under attack on other fronts as well. One result of this trend toward English as the official language is the increased estrangement of transient children, who must struggle to learn the language and assimilate culturally if they are to succeed in school.

What Are Concerned and Committed Teachers to Do?

Breaking the cycle of poverty and limited educational opportunities for the children of migrant workers is a task facing educators today, especially those in agricultural areas where migrant workers make up a significant portion of the labor pool. School districts faced with financial constraints continue to increase class size and standardized testing requirements, thus limiting educators’ flexibility in determining teaching methodology. Teachers often feel pressured to teach to the test and have little time to plan their curriculum. This, in turn,
limits the time and effort they can expend helping migrant children. But educators are a determined group, and they find ways to affirm and improve the education and lives of all their students.

This book is directed at and dedicated to challenging the economic, social, and cultural dictates of the school system in order to serve all students. Advocacy and social justice are two of its key foundations—teaching students to understand the conditions and contradictions of their own position in society and empowering them to look at multiple perspectives and take an equal part in the dialogue about how to make a better world. We need to believe in our students and their unlimited potential despite the challenges they face in their lives. We need to perceive our students’ heritage, language, and culture as strengths that add much to our school and our community. We need to foster our students’ success at what Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) term “reading the word and the world” in the title of their book—to do so much more than teach them reading and the basics in the content areas, to foster the skills needed to navigate this very complex world.

The children of migrant laborers face unique challenges, but we can play a major role in their success. They need advocates. Questioning the status quo and understanding alternative teaching options allow us to renew our commitment to educating for social justice. I hope this book encourages others to ask new questions and ultimately become advocates. Above all, it is meant to support those who teach the children of migrant farmworkers and interact with their families.

About This Book

Although the challenges facing teachers of language-minority students are immense, there are instructional strategies that facilitate English language acquisition and content area knowledge while still satisfying state standards and assessment requirements. Providing optimal instruction to these students requires understanding the foundations on which their culture and lives are built. To facilitate this understanding, the teaching methodology detailed here includes an overview of the history, culture, and needs of families within the

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migrant stream and focuses on the ways we can create an inclusive environment for all the members of our classroom. This book offers background, resources, and strategies for teachers who consider themselves agents of transformation rather than transmission, teachers who want more for their migrant charges.

Although farmworkers in the United States have varied backgrounds, the intent of this book is to equip you with resources and pedagogical strategies that facilitate the language acquisition, communication, and literacy of students whose primary language is Spanish. And although the ideas and practices presented here focus narrowly on the children of migrant farmworkers, they are applicable to many other students in today’s diverse classrooms.

Chapter 2, “How Language Works,” focuses on issues related to learning English. It discusses various philosophies of English language acquisition and pedagogy, including English as a second language and bilingual education. The emphasis is on what you as a regular classroom teacher can do to help your struggling English learners become more proficient.

There is a wealth of culturally relevant materials and resources available; Chapter 3, “How to Create Culturally Responsive Materials and Lessons,” provides in-depth information on how to obtain those resources.

Chapter 4, “How to Create a Community of Readers and Writers,” presents strategies that help create an environment that engages learners in literacy and language acquisition.

Lynn Welsch, a Michigan educator who has worked extensively with migrant students for a number of years, has met with great success by implementing technology in her classroom. In Chapter 5, “How to Use Technology with Migrant Children,” she describes how she uses technology to foster both literacy and cultural understanding in her middle school classroom.

Chapter 6, “How to Reach Out to Migrant Families,” focuses on ways that you can communicate and work with transient families to foster literacy both at home and at school.

Chapter 7, “Final Thoughts,” suggests next steps you can take to turn your classroom—and perhaps the whole school—into a site of social change.
Voices from the Front Lines

Lynn Welsch, who teaches in the Fennville Public Schools, in Michigan, put it this way:

There are students in my school who speak little or no English and who may be here temporarily or for the whole year. These students go to ESL class one period a day but attend regular classes the rest of the day. They are frustrated because they aren’t proficient enough in the English language to be able to understand the concepts they must learn to be successful. We teachers don’t have texts or other resources in Spanish to assist these students. Also, most of us know very little about these children’s culture, which makes it difficult to help them make connections that would facilitate learning.

I think it’s our obligation as teachers of migrant students to advocate for them to receive a more equitable education. Instead of accepting the status quo in our schools, we must speak up and be instrumental in designing courses and identifying strategies to make students successful. This may take us outside our comfort zone at times, but we are also setting an example by taking a stand and teaching for our students, not for the system.
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