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Why Migrant Education Matters

Patricia Anne DiCerbo

> *…Yes, I'm a migrant. I study when I can so that someday, I can stop being poor and stop crying in the fields close to the town I never knew (LeBlanc Flores, 1997, p.95).*

Here, in this quote from a migrant student, is the essence of education and why it is held in such high regard. It is in education, in the pursuit of learning, that aspirations—aspirations to a better life, aspirations to becoming a respected part of society, aspirations to self-fulfillment—are given form and substance and meaning.

For migrant students in the United States, though, such aspirations may seem nearly impossible to achieve. Extraordinarily poor, generally limited English proficient, and with frequently disrupted schooling, they face greater risk of dropping out than does any other group. At the same time, they are a significant part of our educational landscape and cannot be ignored or abandoned.

What are the characteristics of the migrant student population in the U.S?

When we talk about migrant students in the U.S., we are normally referring to children and youth of school age whose families migrate to find work in the agricultural or fishing industries" (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Recent estimates suggest that there are close to eight hundred thousand (752,689) migrant children and youth in the U.S. (*Title I Migrant Education State Performance Reports*, 1997-98). Migrant students are represented in more than one fourth (22,225) of the approximately 80,500 public schools nationwide (excluding Hawaii, New York, and Ohio). About 18 percent of these schools are considered high poverty. Thirty-two percent are in urban areas. The number of public schools enrolling migrant students is highest in six states: California (3,318 schools), Texas (2,857), North Carolina (1,200), Oregon (961), Florida (951), and Puerto Rico (927). (*Database of Schools Enrolling Migrant Children, 2000*).

> *I had thought these people had disappeared with the end of the Great Depression, but here they were: large families, often including half a dozen tow-headed children, working together in the orchard and living in trailers, campers, or tents in the orchard camps (Good Fruit Grower Magazine, 1996).*

Migrant students are typically characterized as at-risk of school failure and dropping out. Many come from high poverty homes, have limited formal schooling, and limited proficiency in the academic English required in school. Moreover, migrant students have to contend with the problems associated with their mobile lifestyle—changing schools and communities several times during a year—and the accompanying isolation from a communal life. (Romo, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education
Center for the Study of Language & Education
2121 K Street NW • Suite 260 • Washington DC 20037
Tel: 202.467.0867 • Fax: 202.467.4283 • www.ncbe.gwu.edu

What education programs and services are available to migrant students?

Programs for migrant children and youth exist at the federal, state and local levels. The Office of Migrant Education in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education has responsibility for the federally funded migrant education program (MEP).

MEP was established in 1966 as one of the amendments to Title I (compensatory education) of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Approximately 621,464 (83 percent) of migrant children and youth in the U.S. are served through MEP. Nine out of ten participants are Hispanic. Four out of ten are in elementary school. (*Title I Migrant Education State Performance Reports*, 1997-98). MEP's stated mission is as follows:

> *All migrant students will reach challenging academic standards and graduate with a high school diploma (or complete a GED) that prepares them for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment*
> (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

The program meets its objectives by allocating money to State education agencies (SEAs) based on the estimated number of eligible migrant students in a given year, and on State compliance with key program goals: supplemental instruction in basic skills and noninstructional support services.

MEP eligibility requirements have been revised over the years, with recent (1994) changes designed to include students most at-risk of school failure, students who have not met State content or performance standards and whose schooling has been recently interrupted. Currently, students are eligible for MEP if they have moved to a different school district "within the last three years because of their parents' temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 4).

Although funds are allocated at the federal level, instructional and support services are designed and administered by State and local education agencies. To accommodate migrant students, education agencies offer programs throughout the year. The table on the next page shows the percentage of migrant students receiving services during the 1997-98 regular and summer school terms.

Not all migrant students participate in the national MEP. Identification of migrant students is inconsistent, with an undetermined number of migrant students never identified for special instruction. Or, because migrants tend to fall into the categories of high poverty and/or limited English proficient students, they may receive educational assistance through other sections of the Title I program or through Title VII (bilingual education). An estimated two thirds of migrant students fit into one or both of these categories (Kindler, 1995).

Most migrant students spend at least part of each day in mainstream classrooms. Migrant students may receive mainstream instruction only, remedial instruction in basic skills, cultural enrichment classes, ESL (English as a second language), bilingual or sheltered content instruction, or some combination of these (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Migrant Education Program

Services	Percentage of Migrant Students	
Instructional	***Regular Term***	***Summer Term***
ESL	15.4	14.4
Reading	23.2	46.2
Language Arts	15.8	38.0
Mathematics	19.0	40.8
Vocational	4.2	6.1
Social Studies	5.5	9.7
Science	5.6	14.8
Other	23.6	48.3
Non-Instructional		
Guidance	19.5	13.7
Social Work	46.2	36.5
Health	11.4	11.2
Dental	5.5	8.0
Nutrition	7.5	21.3
Transportation	9.4	23.9
Other	44.2	33.6

(Source: Title I Migrant Education State Performance Reports, 1997-98)

What are the components of effective instruction for migrant students?

The literature on migrant education reflects the idea that providing an effective education for migrant students means valuing and using what these students already know and can do—their culture, their language, their experience—as a way to provide them with the tools for their own academic and social learning. For example, research as early as 1960 (Sutton) outlined the following series of steps for teachers to take toward a more successful education for migrant students:

- Make migrant students part of the group
- Take time with them
- Encourage them to share their experiences
- Support high standards
- Recognize and welcome parents
- Use cooperative teaching and learning strategies

More recent work (e.g., Kindler, 1995; Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995; Romo in LeBlanc Flores, 1997) presents recommendations not just for individual teachers working with migrant students, but also for systemwide reform of migrant education. For example, schools and districts are asked to:

- Create a positive environment by modeling respect for diversity, and sharing experiences and values
- Build on migrant students' strengths by incorporating students' culture and language into the curriculum
- Enhance self-concept and self-esteem by giving students opportunities to demonstrate initiative, competence and responsibility
- Use cooperative learning strategies to reduce anxiety and boost achievement
- Develop students' metacognitive learning strategies to help them become independent learners

- Use adequate assessment and consultation for placement decisions
- Implement appropriate assessment of language proficiency and academic needs
- Develop school leadership that makes immigrant and migrant students a priority
- Conduct outreach and communication in the parents' home language
- Provide staff development to help teachers and other staff serve immigrant students more effectively
- Schedule immigrant students in classes with English-speaking students

Along these same lines, Whittaker, Salend, and Gutiérrez (1997) provide educators with a list of critical questions for evaluating the curriculum materials used in the migrant classroom (see evaluation checklist at right).

Underlying each of these approaches is the idea that migrant students are valuable, that they matter and can make important contributions to society, as a group and as individuals. Developing an education curriculum to support these students in becoming an integral part of the mainstream is a necessary step for a society that prides itself on the equal opportunity it affords to all groups.

EVALUATION CHECKLIST for Migrant Education Materials

- Are the language and style of the materials appropriate?
- Do the materials present the perspectives and strengths of a diverse group of migrant individuals?
- Are the materials factually correct, realistic and free of cultural, linguistic and sexist biases?
- Do the materials depict individuals in a variety of situations and settings and in nonstereotypic ways?
- Are the experiences of, and issues important to migrant individuals presented in a realistic manner that allows students to recognize and understand their complexities?
- Do the materials portray individuals as being multidimensional and as having ideas and feelings?
- Do the materials introduce others to similarities and differences that they may have with migrant individuals and the contributions migrant workers make to society?
- Do the visuals facilitate discussion and the sharing of information?
- Will the materials stimulate questions and discussion about the migrant lifestyle? (Whittaker, Salend, and Gutiérrez,1997)

Where can I find more about migrant education and services?

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools
http://www.ael.org/eric/

Eastern Stream Center on Resources and Training (ESCORT)
http://www.oneonta.edu/~thomasrl/escort.html

Migrant Head Start Quality Improvement Center
http://www.mhsqic.org/

Migrant Health Program
http://bphc.hrsa.gov/migrant/default.htm

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education
http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu

The National Migrant Education Hotline
(800) 234-8848

U.S. Department of Education's Office of Migrant Education
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/MEP/

U.S. Department of Labor
http://www.dol.gov/

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About The Author

Patricia Anne DiCerbo is a Research Associate/Information Analyst at the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. Her recent articles include *Risking a future: How do we keep Hispanic youth in school?* and *Title VII funding: Make your program dreams a reality*. Ms. DiCerbo has taught ESL and EFL to adult learners, and worked on such research studies as the 1993 *Descriptive Study of Services for Limited English Proficient Students* and the *Adult Rating of Oral English (AROE)*. She holds masters' degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and Political Science, and is working toward an EdD in curriculum and instruction at The George Washington University.

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Joel Gómez, Ed.D., Principal Investigator
Minerva Gorena, Ed.D., Director
Nancy Zelasko, Ph.D., Deputy Director

The George Washington University
WASHINGTON DC

Graduate School of Education and Human Development

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education
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