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The World of the Migrant Child

Coordinated efforts are now under way in many communities to help teachers and parents better meet the special needs of the children in migratory families.

"MY, WHAT a nice report! You must be smart to do such good work."

"I try to do the best I can all the time," came the mature answer from the six-year-old as he smiled into the warm, friendly eyes of his new principal.

It was October 19, and Ted was one of the new migrant children who had come alone to enroll in this school. His school report from Ohio showed perfect attendance from date of opening until October 12. Checks of excellence were placed by these citizenship traits: keeps his word, is trustworthy; works well with others; keeps temper, cheerful under difficulties; makes good use of time, and so on. Written comments by the teacher indicated that he was ready for initial book reading, and that he had adjusted well socially because of his warm and friendly personality.

It was October 29. In another school a nine-year-old migrant girl was enrolling for the third consecutive year.

"Hello, Jane, I've been looking for you back," greeted the principal.

"Good morning. I brought my report card with me. I have two."

The principal unfolded the long pink letter and recognized the experimental transfer record which was being used in connection with the Pilot Project on the Education of Migratory Children, Palm Beach County, Florida, and Northampton County, Virginia.

"Oh, you've seen Miss ———, haven't you?" mentioning the name of the project supervisor.

"Yes, I have," she replied.

The other report was the school transfer card developed cooperatively during the East Coast Migrant Conference in Washington, May 17-19, 1954. These records reported that Jane had attended school 21 days at Hamilton, New York, and 17 days at Exmore, Virginia. She had only missed five days' travel time.

It was December 3, and ten children were waiting at the principal's office.

"Good morning. We are glad to have you in our school. Let's see, I believe I see somebody I know. Oh, yes, Leroy, James and Edith. Welcome back."

As the principal made the necessary preparation to enroll the children, he asked, "How many of you have been in school any place up-the-road?"

"I went in Virginia, but I didn't go back to get my report card."

"I went in Jersey, and here's my card."

"We stayed in Georgia last year. I went to school there after we got back down the road."

The principal talked with the children and placed them in classrooms according

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to their ages and social interests as best he could determine them on brief interviews. One of the boys had been in the school three years previously, but there had been no account of him since he had gone "up-the-road." The accumulative record gave some information and the principal placed him in the grade three years higher than when he had left.

"Even though I'm sure he's missed lots of school, he needs to be with children his size," he thought, "and maybe he will find someone he knew here three years ago."

These are but a few of the 600,000 or more American school-age children who, with their parents, "follow the crops" as agricultural migrants.

Who are these migrants? They are displaced sharecroppers, small farmers, or rejects of change in industry, who are handicapped in finding regular jobs because of "misfortune" at home and the lack of education or special skills. They move up and down, back and forth across the country, seeking work in agriculture to earn a living. Generally most migrant families spend several months of the year in one agricultural area which is termed "home-base," and less time "on-the-trek," that is, a short time in each of several other agricultural areas. The accepted definition for a migrant child is a child whose family, within the past 12 months, has moved at least once across a county or state line for the purpose of seeking or engaging in agricultural labor.

The President's Commission on Migratory Labor, reporting in March 1951, said of them:

"They are children of misfortune. They are the rejects of those sectors of agriculture and of other industries undergoing change. . . ." "Migratory farm laborers move restlessly over the face of the land, but they neither belong to the land nor does the land belong to them. They pass through community after community, but they neither claim the community as home nor does the community claim them. . . ." "They engage in a common occupation, but their cohesion is scarcely greater than that of pebbles on the seashore. Each harvest collects and regroups them. They live under a common condition, but create no techniques for meeting common problems. The public acknowledges the existence of migrants, yet declines to accept them as full members of the community. As crops ripen, farmers anxiously await their coming; as the harvest closes, the community with equal anxiety, awaits their going."

Life as Children Know It

These children live in a world few teachers know. Home for the migrant child is a small shelter or cabin in a camp, a room or two in a dilapidated old farmhouse, or a tent. Usually one room accommodates all the family's activities. The writer overheard one child say boastfully, "We have two shelters now, one for sleepin' and one for eatin'." Another volunteered, "I sleep with mama, daddy, and my little brother and sister in one bed. Janie, her man and their two kids sleep in the other bed." When moving from place to place these children sleep in whatever accommodation they use for traveling—car, truck or bus. Children often sleep every night for a week on the floors or benches in trucks, sitting up in the bus, on the ground, or with two or three others crouched together on the back seat of the car. Food while traveling consists of the cheaper cuts of meat like bologna, cans of sardines, pork and beans, cookies, sweet cakes, and bottled drinks purchased from stores en route.

These boys and girls early assume family responsibilities and come to an early maturity. "Mama's washin', and I have to take care of the little 'uns," or "Mama goes to work at three o'clock and I mind the kids," are familiar expressions heard as children leave school in the afternoon. In many instances the children who take care of younger brothers and sisters are only six and seven years old, and they have the responsibility of "getting supper" and putting the smaller children to bed. One six-year-old shared with her group at school, "I can fry eggs. I cook 'em for Mary, Bill and me sometimes for breakfast." As an afterthought she added, "Mama goes to work real early." A ten-year-old girl, when questioned as to why she was sleepy one day replied, "Judy just cried and cried last night and kept me awake. I couldn't get her to sleep. I doctored her." The mother had returned from work at the packing house at three o'clock in the morning.

COURTESY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, BELLE GLADE, FLORIDA

Children in the Osceola School, Belle Glade, Florida, learn to prepare a meal. For some this lesson may be put to immediate use at home.

Taking care of younger children keeps many children out of school. A 12-year-old girl explained to the writer. "No, I can't go to school here. I have to cook, and take care of the kids." The mother was ill, and confined to her bed. This child was taking care of the family: mother, father, two older brothers, and three younger children.

This experience of caring for younger brothers and sisters is not unusual or necessarily undesirable. However, the degree to which many migrant children assume these family responsibilities, and the early age at which they begin causes them to mature early, to be "old for their years."

Migrant children become wage earners and supplement the family income as soon as they can. The majority of them drop out of school when they reach 16,

and many of those 14 and older work in the crops unless compulsory school attendance is rigidly enforced. When one small child was asked about his older brother coming to school, he said, "Naw, he ain't goin', he's old enough to work now." Children frequently work after school hours in the fields or doing odd jobs.

"You wanna buy some oranges?" came the inquiring voice just outside the office door.

"I might! Won't you come in?" spoke the writer, recognizing her chance to talk with one of the migrant boys attending that school.

"They're only 20 cents, I get a nickel for sellin' 'em," he added as he entered with the dozen oranges.

"What are you going to do with your money?"

"I'm helpin' my dad buy a truck. He says when the truck's paid for he is goin' to buy me a bicycle."

From the conversation which followed, the writer learned that this eleven-year-old boy was born in Tennessee but had been moving about in five states and had attended 20 different schools. "Oh, I didn't go all the year to any of these—maybe two weeks, a month; maybe two months. I'm just in the fifth grade," he volunteered quickly after mentioning the 20 schools.

It was learned that "my dad" was his step-father, and that he had about $200 paid on his truck.

"It won't take us long to get it paid for, with me helpin' him," he supplied hopefully, "then he'll help me get my bicycle."

The boy was given a quarter for the oranges and the writer pursued the conversation.

"You say you've gone to school longer here than any place; I suppose this is your home."

"Nope, ain't got no home, just any place we're at, that's my home."

"You like it here?"

"Yeah, I wish we could stay here all the time, but my dad can't get work here all the time, and we have to move. That's why he got the truck. He can make more money if he has his own truck—pick up odd jobs."

"Why do you like to live here?" ventured the writer again.

"Oh, a lot of things. I like our club here in the camp, I like school, and I play 'Cowboy and Indians' with the boys when I'm not workin'."

This conversation reflects experiences and attitudes which are common to migrant children. This boy does not mention, and perhaps is not aware of the school districts he lived where he did not enroll in school at all.

The migrant child's experiences differ somewhat from the experiences of the child in what we commonly regard as a "normal" situation, whatever that may be. It should be pointed out, however, that migrant children are normal groups of children. The differences are differences in degree and not in kind.

A migrant mother is guest of the cooking class of the Osceola School. Many migrant mothers are employed, leaving household tasks to youngsters such as these.

COURTESY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, BELLE GLADE, FLORIDA

Life as Experienced by Migratory Parents

With few exceptions the migratory parents want and love their children and are bringing them up in the only kind of life they know and can afford.

Family loyalties are deeply rooted. Sometimes children are left behind in the care of a grandparent, but usually large numbers of them are to be seen wherever migrant families reside. Work schedules of parents are such that children spend many unsupervised hours at home, and many smaller children are taken to the fields or left in trucks or cars alone while parents work. Many families never sit down together at a table for a meal.

The avowed aspirations of these parents are often in conflict to an extreme degree with the aspirations that the schools hold for their children, and with the realities of their pattern of living. One hears over and over again such statements as these: "Never had much of a chance to go to school and I'm goin' to send mine unless they're sick." "Education means more to me than anything else around. You know it when you ain't got it." "I sure want my kids to git an education, so they won't have to work like I do."

Most of these parents accept failure for their children. They frequently will make such remarks as, "Now, he's in the fourth grade, but we've moved around, and he's missed a lot of school, and he's behind, so you may have to put him back." Or "He has a hard time learnin', so he may not do very well." Is it not probable that such expressed attitudes indicate their own feelings of failure, accepted also for their children?

The exigencies of life—the necessity of providing for immediate needs and the inability to clearly see life conditions for tomorrow—make it impossible for most migrant people to plan their lives in terms of extended goals. Fundamentally, migrant parents are dissatisfied with the uncertainties of making a living and their inability to plan for the education of the children. Most of them long "to settle" or to have a definite plan of migration which insures steady work and regular schooling for the children. "I want to get a home and settle down somewhere. Children can't get a good education movin' around." "If I could just get steady work. Change doesn't hurt children if they don't have to miss school."

Statements such as these reflect their desires and hopes.

No Typical Migrant Child

There is no "typical migrant child." The seasonal migratory families who move from "crop to crop" are many different kinds of people who come from many different places and from many types of jobs. A large proportion of the workers in the Eastern Seaboard migratory stream, which originates in Florida and moves northward, are American Negroes. A great number are Anglo-whites; some are Puerto Ricans, and an increasing number are Texas-Americans of Mexican extraction, from Southern Texas. The children either have had work experience in or have been closely associated with the growth and processing of many different types of vegetables and fruits, sugar cane, cotton and tobacco. Children have a repertory of information about many of these crops, and have picked up scattered bits of information about the different places where they have lived.

When teachers identify these varied experiences and backgrounds, the interests, needs, aptitudes and abilities of migrant children, they find them comparable to any group of normal children. Some are very bright, some are average and some are slow to learn. Many have physical handicaps and emotional disturbances, and others have special aptitudes for arts, crafts, music or homemaking. Many of these children have warm, friendly personalities which command recognition; others are shy and timid with introverted personalities. Still others attract attention by their aggressiveness and unacceptable behavior patterns.

The two outstanding facts of the migrant child's school experience are retardation and frustration, even though there are some exceptions. Generally speaking, the frustrations are caused by the many inadequacies of home background and living—inadequacies inherent in the life pattern of lower-socio-economic groups. Retardation is caused by irregular school attendance and the necessity for repeated adjustments to new and different school situations. The majority of migratory children most need experiences which will help them develop a sense of personal belief in themselves, a realization of their worth as individuals.

All children have to learn from their own experiences. This is a challenge to all teachers, but one which takes on special significance when many of the children in a classroom have moved about in many kinds of situations. There is a unique element in the experiences of the child who moves with the crops, since so much of his life pattern is unrelated to group and community living. This results in special needs on his part, but also provides distinctive experiences upon which the alert teacher will draw in helping him to gain the basic knowledge, skills and understanding which all American citizens need.

Schools Are Challenged

The presence in a community of migrant families presents real challenges to the schools. Local school administrators face the problem of providing physical facilities and teachers for many additional children during the harvest season. On a "home-base" situation the enrollments of some schools will increase as much as 100 per cent between the opening weeks of school and mid-term, and nearly all schools experience considerable increase. In "on-the-trek" situations the problem is just as acute when large numbers of children enter an area for brief periods of from two weeks to three months. Both situations require additional school facilities, which may involve financial responsibility beyond local means.

The basic problem comes after these children get into school. It is this: How do we modify and adapt our curriculum to meet the special needs of these children without limiting opportunities for the resident children? Principals and teachers ask such questions as these: "Where shall I place this child?" "Do you know any appropriate materials I can get for these children?" "How can I help Guadalupe to speak English?" "Susan is having difficulty adjusting; what else can I do?" Such questions indicate that school people are increasingly concerned to provide a school program which gives these children an opportunity to develop at their own rate, which is meaningful to them, and which takes into account their unique life experiences. All children need to "belong," to be accepted by their peers, and to develop certain basic skills; migrant children need these opportunities to an exaggerated degree. They need school opportunities that are of the same kinds provided other children but differing in degree in accordance with their differing experiences.

As teachers learn more about the pattern of living of migratory children they realize that their school education cannot be considered apart from such factors as health, sanitation, recreation, welfare, housing, and economic status, all of which affect the education of the children. So they must seek ways of meeting many needs of children. Problems are numerous. "How can I get glasses for Sue?" "Jim needs some clothes." "Addie must go to a dentist." "Bobby is not getting the proper food." And when she tries to work with the family, "I have been to see Mac's mother three times, but she is always working."

Until and unless there is a fundamental change in our economy, the migrant child will be with us in great numbers. Thousands of teachers, in schools in most of the 48 states, will give him, or deny to him, his chance to be what he is capable of being.

There is urgent need for in-service educational experiences for teachers, geared specifically to their needs in working with migratory children.

Colleges are becoming concerned and some recent developments are promising. Two extension classes were held in the Glades Area of Palm Beach County, Florida, during the winter months of 1955-56. The purpose of these extension courses,[1] which explored better ways of working with children in classrooms where many migratory children enroll, was three-fold:

1. To provide additional in-service training experiences for all teachers;
2. To further promote interest in and development of the Pilot Project on the Education of Migratory Children; and
3. To develop a syllabus for a possible course to be used by colleges in their preservice program for teachers going into areas where migrant children live.

Teachers who completed these classes felt they had grown in fuller understanding and appreciation in these significant areas:

1. The migrant family and his problems;
2. Ways of welcoming and accepting children into school;
3. Ways of using people and agencies in their communities as resources;

[1] Sponsored by Florida State University, Tallahassee, Dr. Hazen A. Curtis, director, and Florida A & M University, Tallahassee, Dr. W. S. Maize, director.

4. The development and use of records and reports and related professional data;

5. Possibilities of guiding and extending educational opportunities as children travel; and

6. Development and use of types of instructional materials and of methods related to actual experiences and needs of children, such as: instructional materials for the skill subjects; working with Spanish-speaking children; arts and crafts; home-making; and methods of using children's unique experiences.