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Harvesting hardships: Educators' views on the challenges of migrant students and their consequences on education

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines the hardships experienced by migrant students, most of them immigrants or children of immigrants, drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 migrant educators employed in the public school system in Florida in 2013. We examine immigrant migrant students' hardships and analyze the impact they have on migrant students' education and, ultimately, social mobility. We find that migrant students face five major challenges that may adversely affect their education and social mobility: (1) cultural barriers, including language and communication and students' and parents' knowledge, interactions and involvement with school; (2) challenges related to family and care, such as parental absence and working conditions, family structure, children's care responsibilities for younger siblings and other family issues; (3) material needs, especially poverty, hunger, housing, underage child labor, transportation, and health issues; (4) educational challenges as a result of students' migratory lifestyles, lack of school supplies and teachers' lack of knowledge about and attitudes towards migrant students; and (5) hardships related to undocumented legal status. We show how these hardships result in specific practical, physical, social, and emotional consequences that adversely affect migrant students' education. Lastly, we discuss our findings in the context of existing scholarship and present implications for policy and future research.

1. Introduction

Fifty years ago, in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the "War on Poverty," introducing social and economic programs that would lift millions of children out of poverty over the following decades (Sparks, 2014). In his 1964 State of the Union address, President Johnson stated that the cause of poverty may lie "in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities" (Sparks, 2014: http://www.edweek/org). In order to level the educational playing field for the children of migrant agricultural workers—laborers who migrate across the country to follow the crops— the Johnson Administration created Title I grants under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. These funds pay for special programs and services for the children of migrant agricultural workers (State of Washington, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).[2] In the United States, there are currently over three million mig]rant farmworkers (NCFH, 2012) and an estimated 500,000-800,000 school age migrant students (McHatton, Zalaquett, & Cranson-Gingras, 2006).

This article analyzes the educational impact of the hardships experienced by migrant students from the perspective of twenty educators who are employed through the Migrant Education Program (MEP) in one county in Florida. For the purpose of this study, we use the term "migrant educators" to refer to employees of the MEP who work to further migrant students' education, including certified migrant teachers, migrant teacher aides, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers. It is particularly interesting to obtain migrant educators' views because they are the "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003) who have profound insights into the challenges that migrant students face.

Despite consistent federal efforts, the children of migrant farmworkers fall behind in school. For example, they are typically a year older than other children in their grade and at least a year and a half behind in the curriculum (Lundy-Ponce, 2010). They are "significantly marginalized and underserved" (Bejarano & Valverde, 2012, p. 22); a fact that results in only 50.7% of migrant students successfully graduating from high school (BOCES, 2009, cited in Bejarano and Valverde (2012)). Given the achievement gap between migrant and non-migrant students and the incompatibility between these students' characteristics and the U.S. school system, it is salient to investigate the processes by which migrant students' hardships, such as poverty

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[2] In recent years, Title 1, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, allocated funding to migrant students through Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) (Murray, 2013).

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(Romanowski, 2003), the language barrier (Collins, 2012; Green, 2003), and the transiency of the migrant lifestyle (BOCES, 2009; McHatton et al., 2006) affect students' learning outcomes.

As most of migrant students are immigrants or the children of immigrants, it is also important to think about the impact that education could have on the integration of these students into U.S. society. Portes and Zhou (1993) and Zhou (1997) have shown that the paths towards immigrant integration are stratified by social class— a phenomenon they have called "segmented assimilation" — immigrants either adapt through integration into the middle-class; experience assimilation into the working class or permanent poverty, or achieve economic advancement with the intention to preserve community values and ties (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 82). If we as a society are interested in avoiding immigrant migrant students' assimilation into permanent poverty, then this study is particularly relevant because high school completion is a factor that reduces the risk of poverty (Iceland, 2006).

Our study explores migrant students' hardships and analyzes the negative consequences of these hardships on students' learning processes and, ultimately, educational outcomes. Our study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the hardships that migrant students experience? (2) How do these hardships adversely affect migrant students' learning processes and educational outcomes?

2. Theoretical framework

These research questions and our analysis of the data are informed by the ideas and concepts developed by Bourdieu (1986), Blandina Cardenas and Jose Cardenas (1977), and Lareau (2002). While Bourdieu and Lareau theorize about the resources that adversely affect poor and working-class students in the educational process, Cardenas and Cardenas highlight the systemic deficiencies of the school system with regard to minority and poor students. Bourdieu (1986) differentiated between three different types of capital that may affect social mobility and life chances: (1) economic or financial capital, such as parental income, wealth, and assets; (2) cultural capital, including language proficiency and the ability to consume cultural objects, such as music and art; and (3) social capital, the networks and social ties that may prove useful (or harmful) in furthering students' academic and social success (Bourdieu, 1986; Weininger, 2005). Bourdieu pointed out that economic capital will allow a family to buy the time and resources needed to bolster their cultural and social capital; in that way, the three forms of capital are profoundly interrelated. His theory is useful in framing our study because it shows how different types of resources (or capital) may cause adverse effects on mobility for economically disadvantaged students, such as migrant students. This theory has informed our analysis by focusing us on these different types of capital.

Relatedly, Lareau's (2002, 2003) study built on and used Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to compare how (Black and White) working class/poor parents and middle-class parents in the United States use these different types of capital when interacting with the school system. Most importantly for this present study, Lareau found that parenting approaches and interactions with professionals differ significantly across classes (but not races): while middle-class children feel a sense of entitlement when dealing with teachers, working-class and poor children feel a sense of constraint; working-class and poor children and parents are deferential and outwardly accepting, but distrust professionals, such as teachers. Middle-class children and parents act in an assertive manner, question professionals, and intervene on behalf of themselves and their children (Lareau, 2002, 2003). Lareau termed the parenting approach of working-class and poor families "the accomplishment of natural growth" (2002, p. 747) and the approach of middle class families "concerted cultivation" (2002, p. 747).

Cardenas and Cardenas' (1977) theory of incompatibilities casts light on how the resources that migrant students bring to the educational process interact with the public school system: Cardenas (1974), who studied the causes of the achievement gap between Black and Mexican-American students and "White Anglo" students in the Denver public schools, argued that the education system itself, not minority families' deficiencies, must be held responsible for the failure of minority and poor students. Cardenas (1974) and Cardenas and Cardenas (1977) assert that typical instructional programs are geared towards middle-class students and are therefore incompatible with the characteristics of Black, Mexican-American and economically disadvantaged children, such as the children who are the focus of this present study. The authors identified poverty, culture, language, mobility, and social perceptions as interrelated and interdependent domains that affect children's education. Poverty affects children's overall development and speech patterns and "an absence of success models and academic oriented tradition develop differing concepts toward schools and schooling" (Cardenas, 1974, p. 9); poverty also leads to "a relative unavailability of intellectually stimulating toys, games, and activities" (Cardenas, 1974, p. 9). Children are also affected by poverty because poor housing, malnutrition, and health adversely affect poor children's development. Schools are "culturally biased institutions" (Cardenas, 1974, p. 13) because school personnel may know nothing about the cultures of minority students and/or do not act on the knowledge they do have and/or stereotype minority children, for instance in instruction materials. Cardenas and Cardenas also point out the trauma to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners, resulting from an immersion or "cold turkey approach" (Cardenas, 1974, p. 14) to English language acquisition. The authors criticize that ESOL programs postpone the child's development of skills and acquisition of content while diminishing the value of the child's native language; emphasize that instructional programs are (erroneously) built on the assumption that students are not mobile, which they are; and stress how schools will result in minority children's negative self-perception: "in general, the negative feelings which schools hold and express to minority children lead to the development of very low levels of expectancy for the performance of these children, and all children tend to perform in keeping with what is expected of them" (Cardenas, 1974, p. 16).

Building on Bourdieu's theory, we assumed that migrant students' financial capital, cultural capital, and social capital may adversely affect migrant students' educational outcomes. Given Lareau's findings on the parenting approach of poor and working-class families, such as the families of migrant farmworkers, we also assumed that migrant parents and children would act deferentially towards teachers and not actively intervene with teachers in the education process on children's behalf. Cardenas and Cardenas' work suggests that schools do not accommodate the specific needs of migrant students, stereotype them and increase their negative self-perceptions.

3. Literature review

There is robust empirical evidence on the hardships of migrant agricultural farmworkers and their children (Bejarano & Valverde, 2012; Cobb-Clark, Sinning, & Stillman, 2012; Collins, 2012; Embrey et al., 2001; Green, 2003; Holmes, 2013; Johnson, 1987), and there are strong evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of MEP programs (Florida, 2007; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009; Johnson, 1987; Waller & Crawford, 2001); however, we know little about the process by which the hardships of migrant students translate into negative learning processes and educational outcomes from the viewpoint of their educators. While Salinas and Reyes' (2004) qualitative study examined the interactions between migrant educators (administrators and counselors) and migrant students, they did not specifically address the goal of this present study. One study that focuses specifically on migrant students' classroom experiences (Romanowski, 2001, 2003) examined an eight-week summer school program in rural Ohio based on non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators (Romanowski, 2001, 2003). Romanowski's study provides an important and unique perspective on migrant advocates and their role (2001), as well as the role of cultural capital in educating