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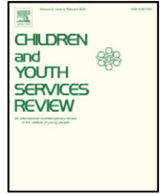

"They know there is hope:" How migrant educators support migrant students and their families in navigating the public school system

Janese L. Free *, Katrin Križ

Emmanuel College, Boston, MA 02115, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study, which draws on the practice knowledge of 20 migrant educators employed in the public school system in Florida who were interviewed in 2013, shows how migrant educators support migrant students and their families in navigating the public school system. We found that migrant educators supported students and their families in navigating the school system in several ways: by helping students access supplies, technology and practical help and other school-related assistance; providing students with a supplemental education; supporting students emotionally; liaising between students, parents and the school; empowering parents to resist discrimination; and by managing school logistics. We discuss our findings in the context of existing scholarship and present implications for policy and future research.

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1. Introduction

There are 650,000 children who migrate across the United States each year to follow their migrant farm worker-parents as they harvest fruit and vegetables (Green, 2003). Immigrant migrant farmworkers—workers from countries outside the United States, mostly Mexico (68%) (NCFH, 2012), who migrate across the U.S. to harvest agricultural crops—have been employed in the U.S. since the late 1800s (Embrey, 2002). Today, there are well over one million migrant farm workers, 78% of whom are foreign born, and 52% of whom have children (NCFH, 2012). This study analyzes how migrant educators, defined as employees of a Migrant Education Program (MEP), whose goal is to support migrant students in succeeding in school, help migrant students and their families navigate the public education system in the face of systemic cultural and institutional barriers (Authors, 2014; Green, 2003; Romanowski, 2003). The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 defines migrant students as "children of workers who move with their families to seek temporary or seasonal work in factories, agriculture, or fishing" (Green, 2003, p. 52). This article focuses only on the children of agricultural migrant workers who are in school and refers to them as "migrant students."

The cultural and structural barriers experienced by migrant students in the school system result from the system's hostility towards students of color. Public schools were not established with the backgrounds and experiences of individuals who are marginalized and poor in mind. More specifically, when describing the educational experiences of Chicana/o migrant students, Cardenas (1995) explained, "The typical instructional program, with built-in continuity and sequences that assume that the child in the classroom today was there yesterday and will be there tomorrow, is incompatible with this mobility [of migrant students]" (p. 26). Given this reality, many public institutions, such as schools, tend to ignore and overlook the cultural wealth that migrant students, and other students of color, bring to the school system and that can make them resilient to systemic challenges (Cardenas, 1974; Cardenas & Cardenas, 1977; Delgado Gaitan, 2012; Huerta & Riojas-Cortez, 2011; Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso (2005), based on her work on the forms of capital that exist in communities of color, the community cultural wealth (CCW) that migrant students bring from their homes and communities into the classroom include aspirational capital (students' and families' ability to hold on to their hopes and dreams in spite of systemic barriers); linguistic capital (communication and linguistic skills in multiple languages and styles); familial capital (kinship ties that teach children to maintain a healthy relationship to their communities); social capital (peer and community contacts that support students in navigating social institutions with the help of emotional and instrumental supports); navigational capital (children's skills in maneuvering through social institutions that may be challenging and hostile to communities of color, such as public school systems

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: freej@emmanuel.edu (J.L. Free), krizka@emmanuel.edu (K. Križ).

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or college campuses), and resistant capital (knowledge and skills as a result of an oppressed group's resistance to oppression) (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso's (2005) framework acknowledges the strengths related to the lives and histories of marginalized people, but also helps to reframe deficit models and perspectives regarding communities of color. In his study based on testimonies of ten Chicana undergraduate students, Huber (2009) expands the work of Yosso (2005) and Yosso and Garcia (2007) by adding the concept "spiritual capital" to capture the humanity of Latina/o undocumented immigrants and challenge racist nativist framing of their experiences. Yosso and Garcia's (2007) subsequent work suggests that according to the community cultural wealth framework, the forms of capital are not static or mutually exclusive, but instead they shift and flow and can even overlap.

Similarly, Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) ethnographic analysis of Latino households and examination of classroom practices suggests that "funds of knowledge" exist in Latino homes where household members possess ample important cultural and cognitive knowledge that is often overlooked or ignored by the education system. This knowledge, defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992, p. 133), often centers around topics such as agriculture, economics, household management, religion and science and is built around relationships that are rooted in *confianza*, meaning trust. The scholars argue that these bodies of knowledge have great potential utility for formal educational instruction and should be taken advantage of in the classroom (Gonzales et al., 2005; Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004). For example, Rueda et al.'s (2004) study found that para-educators used funds of knowledge to enhance instruction, in informal contexts, to enhance teachers' understanding of students' lives and the knowledge they brought to the classroom. The notion of the value of funds of knowledge is frequently in opposition to the perception of these often working poor families who are often viewed as "disorganized socially and deficient intellectually" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). The strengths-based funds of knowledge framework therefore challenges the all too often cited deficit model, which is frequently used to characterize the deficiencies of low income children and families. The framework has been applied traditionally to students in grades K-12, yet studies like Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama's (2012) demonstrate that it can also be applied to Latino/a students' college preparation and access, as well as career aspirations.

While there is a significant body of research that has evidenced the cultural and structural challenges experienced by migrant students and their negative consequences (Authors, 2014; Bejarano & Valverde, 2012; Green, 2003; Romanowski, 2001 and Romanowski, 2003), which we will discuss in further detail in Section 2 below, there is very limited scholarship analyzing whether and how migrant educators who work with this student population on a day-to-day basis support and empower migrant students and their families in navigating the public school system. This study also adds to the existing literature because it focuses on the voices of teachers—an important and often missing perspective in the research. As Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) noted: "Conspicuous by their absence from the literature of research on teaching are the voices of teachers themselves […] and the ways teachers themselves define and understand their work lives" (p. 83). This study examines how migrant educators support migrant students and their families in navigating the public school system in their interactions with individuals in the school system, including students, teachers and administrators.

2. The Migrant Education Program

The MEP is a federally-funded program that was enacted in 1966 as an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. It targets students whose school experiences are interrupted because their families travel for work and who are learning English as their second language. The program reaches over 485,000 students across 49 states (Johnson, 1987; Lundy-Ponce, 2010). The state of Florida, where the data for this study were gathered, ranked third in the United States for the largest population of migrant students (only falling behind California and Texas) (Florida Advisory Committee, 2011). The state allocated $21 million to its 67 school districts for this program for school year 2005–2006 (Florida Advisory Committee, 2007) to serve approximately 25,100 migrant students (Florida Advisory Committee, 2011). The main goals of the program are student identification and recruitment, interstate and intrastate coordination among schools, and advocacy and family support (Florida Advisory Committee, 2007). Many of the migrants based in Florida travel on the "eastern stream," one of three main migrant agricultural routes in the U.S., which includes Southern states and the eastern seaboard (Embrey, 2002). In Florida, 75% of the 120,000 migrant farmworkers were born outside the U.S., with the majority from Mexico and Central American (Florida Advisory Committee, 2007).

3. Literature review

Prior research suggests that migrant students face a plethora of hardships in their daily lives (Authors, 2014; Bejarano & Valverde, 2012; Collins, 2012; Embrey, 2002; Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004; Green, 2003; Lundy-Ponce, 2010; Romanowski, 2003). For example, when it comes to school-related hardships, Bejarano and Valverde (2012) describe migrant students as "significantly marginalized and underserved" (p. 22) who 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). Additionally, migrant students often lack the means to purchase required school uniforms and learning materials (Authors, 2014; Garza et al., 2004), as well as lack the funds to participate in extracurricular activities (Authors, 2014). Outside of school, migrant students face additional hardships, such as poverty and constant migration (Garza et al., 2004; Romanowski, 2003), as well as language barriers and familial legal status issues (Authors, 2014; Green, 2003).

Despite all that we do know about the hardships that migrant students encounter at the academic, social and emotional levels (Authors, 2014; Bejarano & Valverde, 2012; Green, 2003; Lundy-Ponce, 2010; Romanowski, 2003), we know very little about the ways in which migrant educators work to support their students and help break down systemic education barriers. Previous scholarship tends to propose what teachers and migrant educators should do (Cobb-Clark, Sinning & Stillman, 2012; Moll et al., 1992; Monzo & Rueda, 2001; Romanowski, 2003, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), but not what migrant educators already do to help migrant students and their families empower themselves and minimize the achievement gap between migrant and non-migrant students. Research consistently shows that migrant workers and their children continue to experience low pay, challenging working conditions and lack of housing, medical care and education (Green, 2003; Romanowski, 2003). When it comes to education, there is a significant achievement gap between migrant students and non-migrant students—in fact, migrant farmworkers are "the most undereducated major subgroup in the country" (Milton & Watson, 1997, n.p.) — especially because of poverty and mobility (Authors, 2014; Fisher, Matthews, Stafford, Nakagawa, & Durante, 2002; Florida Advisory Committee, 2011; Romanowski, 2003 and 2001). For example, nationally, only 50.7% of migrant students succeed in graduating from high school (BOCES, 2012) as compared to 70% of the student population in the United States overall (Amos, 2008). Yosso (2006) describes a "Chicana/o educational pipeline" based on national data where (due to "leaks" in the pipeline) only 44 out of 100 Chicana/o students will graduate from high school; of those, only 7 out of 100 will go on to attend and graduate with a Bachelor's degree (p. 3). Migrant students tend to complete only 7.7 years of schooling (compared to 12.5 for the general population) (Green, 2003). In Florida, specifically, the data show similar trends with only 35% of migrant students reading at proficiency (versus 59% of non-migrant students) and 50% of migrant students at

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