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Running Head: IMPACT OF MIGRANT EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Impact of the Migrant Education Program on Children of Seasonal Farm Workers

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Abstract

It has long been understood that the children of migrant workers are among the most vulnerable populations of students in the U.S. educational system. In response to this, the federal government created the Migrant Education Program in 1966 and in 1979 placed the program under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education. But is the program achieving its aim of providing equity to these children and young adults? Finding the answer to that research question is the purpose of this senior capstone, which is to examine the impact of the Migrant Education Program on children of seasonal farm workers. Through literature review, interviews with teachers in the Monterey County schools, as well as representatives of the Monterey County Office of Education, the findings provide a glimpse of what the program offers to migrant students in Monterey County and across the country, and questions whether these programs are up to the task before them.

The Impact of the Migrant Education Program on the Children of Seasonal Farm Workers

Introduction and Background

Imagine being separated from almost everyone you know, moving to a new and unfamiliar place, being placed in a social or academic environment with strangers who don't speak the same language as you, who maybe don't dress like you, and who don't observe the same cultural traditions as you. and whom you always suspect are mocking and ridiculing you. Imagine being expected to thrive and succeed academically and socially in these conditions. These circumstances are all too familiar to children whose families are migratory, following the agricultural or fishing seasons.

Families who work in farming, without a permanent home, often move once or more each school year, disrupting the education of their children with every move. Some families may move up to ten times within a school year (Trotter, 1992, as cited in Romanowski, 2003). This is not bad parenting, but an economic necessity for many undereducated and frequently non-English-speaking field workers or workers in the commercial fishing industry (Good, 2010). They face a tough choice between leaving their children with family or friends as they try to eke out a living in these difficult circumstances, or else bring their children with them, to a new region or state, and changing schools or withdrawing the children from school. This stressful and unstable academic environment is the primary reason that children of migrant workers are one of the most educationally vulnerable student groups and the most undereducated major subgroup in the U.S. educational system (Romanowski, 2003).

To help relieve some of the inequity experienced by migrant students, the federal government created the Migrant Education Program (MEP) in 1966, “as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society initiative (Madrid, 2019, p. 69). In 1979, the U.S. Department of Education took over the administration of this program. Migrant Program services are supplemental services over and above what is offered through the school district, and have to be recertified at least every three years. This program provides such services as push-in tutoring, after-school homework assistance, summer school, school readiness, and college and career readiness, to name a few.

In addition to this academic assistance, the MEP also encourages migrant students to consider their future and contemplate either higher education, or else decide on careers that will allow their families to prosper financially and socially. This stability will not only improve the lives of the migrant children, but will also affect their current and future families. This is best done by incorporating their culture into the classroom as much as possible, and validating their culture and home language(s), if they are different from the primary language of their school. These additional steps help nurture the whole person, which makes it more likely they will graduate from high school, and hopefully pursue higher education, but also believe in themselves and their intrinsic worth. Without these additional supports, migrant students face a frightening prospect for their future. According to Romanowski (2001),

[Because of] “the constant interruption of their educational process and the inability of schools to understand their culture and meet their needs, this leads to confusion, frustration, and a feeling of alienation.” (Velasquez, 1996, p. 28). This slowly depletes the child’s perseverance toward graduation and plays a major factor in migrant students dropping out of school (p. 32).

My primary research question is: How does the Migrant Education Program (MEP) impact children of seasonal farm workers? My secondary or related research questions are:

1. What is the Migrant Education Program (MEP)? How did the MEP develop and continue to evolve?
2. What does the research say about the impact of the MEP on the children of seasonal workers?
3. Is there an MEP currently functioning in Monterey County? If there is, what is it? What kinds of services does the program provide? How are migrant children identified as possibly being eligible for the program? What causes the parents of some of the eligible children not to utilize MEP services?
4. Are there gaps in services that are needed to help migrant children succeed educationally and socially?
5. Are there resources available to provide the needed services and better coordination between programs to serve migrant students? If there are, what are they?

Literature Review

What do teachers say about the Migrant Education Program (MEP)? There is a large percentage of teachers who work in the MEP who are former migrant students (or sometimes migrant workers) themselves. (Bynes, 2018) Based on the backgrounds and responses of the teachers, it would seem that Migrant Education Program Teachers (MEPT) having a similar life experience as their students saw the benefit of this program and filled out the numbers of teachers with prior migratory experience. However, the literature doesn't indicate the

background and educational experience required for employment in the program, and it is possible that prior experience was required or desired.

One thing that is clear from the literature, is that MEPTs advocate for their students and families. (Bynes, 2018) Due to the prior lived experience of many of the MEPTs, they had personal knowledge of the additional needs their students possessed, which frequently differed or were more personal in nature than with traditional students. Another additional contrast from traditional teaching roles was the much higher contact rate with parents this was clearly beneficial to both students and their parents, as the teachers had much in common with them, but also frequency reduced the need for interpreters, or putting a child of the uncomfortable role of interceding between parents and teachers.

But what about teachers other than MEPTs? How do classroom teachers and school administration feel about the Migrant Education Program? One thing that seems to influence the positive perception of the program is bilingualism and biculturalism of the teachers. This allows better communication and understanding between the teachers and the parents, something that teachers agree is important in to create working relationships (Smith, 2020). While dual-language conversations may be uncomfortable for teachers, they are even more so for parents with the unequal power dynamic. Even when translators are available, it is harder to establish a trusting relationship with someone whom you can't converse with. Having a translator also increases the likelihood of communication errors, as opposed to same-language communication. Other strategies some teachers use are home visits, or visits to the parents' worksite, especially when schedule conflicts preclude parents from visiting schools for events like parent-teacher conferences or award assemblies.

What do parents say about the Migrant Education Program? Parents whose children participate in the MEP seem to fall into two camps. Some parents are very involved and know what services are available to them and their children, and know what is happening with their children's education. Other parents do not know the personnel assigned to provide services to their children, don't know if they receive tutoring in school, and don't know what benefits they are eligible for (Folmer-Cushman, 1997). The literature does not make it clear if language differences impact the discrepancy in these two populations of parents, but it seems to be a rational conclusion. In either case, parents whose children are enrolled in the program in general seem to think it is a positive resource for their children, even if they don't understand all the possibilities the program can provide. One group of parents, however, seem suspicious about the purpose of the program, and if it is safe to disclose the personal information the program requires. Fears of being reported to ICE leaves many parents of undocumented children to bypass this well-meaning program (Madrid, 2019). The situation is further complicated when some of the children in the family were born in the U.S., while others were born outside of the U.S. (Good, 2010).

Do test scores back up the perceived effectiveness of MEP? Although testing ELLs can be deceptive, depending on the testing instrument, it is generally inferred that the MEP programming produces better results than had those students just received the same services as traditional students in the classroom. When compared to control groups of migrant student populations, migrant students enrolled in MEP outperformed the control students in the post-phase of pre- and post-testing (Schmitt, 2017, Dedham, 1975). This was true of both school year tutoring and summer MEP programs. The summer programs unsurprisingly helped prevent the

predictable “summer slide,” or summer learning loss many students exhibit when they return to school in the fall (Schmitt, 2017).

What about transient young adults 21 and under who follow the seasons? There are two subsets of young adults that fall under the purview of Out of School Youth Services (OYS). These are either former students who have dropped out of school before high school graduation, or youth who have come to the United States specifically to work, known as HTW (Here to Work) migrants. These 16-21 year old youth may qualify for MEP services either through their parents’ eligibility or their own migrant work (Coronado, 2012). Although different from the in-school services that most migrant students receive, OSY receive services that concentrate on preparing them for the workforce, such as GED preparation, English language classes, computer technology classes, Leadership workshops and retreats, and other classes and workshops (Monterey County Office of Education, Migrant Education Services, 2021). Another major benefit is the health and dental screenings and services that they are eligible to receive. Although not as heavily promoted as in the general MEP, these youth also are eligible for educational counseling, and may be funneled toward college preparation and recruitment.

How is Mini-Corps helping to break the cycle? Whoever conceived of the idea of the Mini-Corps program was brilliant. This program pairs former migrant students who are currently full-time college students working toward their teaching credential with migrant students in the classroom and during the summer MEP programming (Monterey County Office of Education, Migrant Education Services, 2021). All benefit from this program. The pre-service teachers have the opportunity to practice what they have learned about pedagogy and classroom management in a controlled environment where their contributions are appreciated, and receive a stipend for their services; the migrant students receive extra academic support from someone who has been

in their shoes not long ago, and perhaps has the same culture, as well as similar lived experiences; the teachers have additional help with students who require focused attention without student leaving the classroom, as tutoring is push-in, rather than pull-out; and finally, the schools receive needed services at no cost to them, since Mini-Corps tutors are paid through MEP program funding. The Mini-Corps tutors have come from disadvantaged backgrounds and through their schooling and the MEP are being prepared for a rewarding career and joining the middle class. Migrant students have a role model that they can actually see has been where they are, and have succeeded in leaving those circumstances. This is an outstanding use of resources, both monetary and human.

Methods and Procedures

This study was qualitative in nature and the interview and survey questions required affirmative or negative responses, with the option to elaborate on responses. At the end of each instrument was the opportunity to offer any additional pertinent information the researcher should know for the purpose of this study.

Participants:

Although I had invited a total of 13 teachers from a single South Monterey County school to interview, only three accepted my invitation. One of two administrators/field staff at the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) also agreed to an interview. Repeated requests to school administration for permission to send home anonymous surveys went unanswered.

Materials:

As a way to document teachers' background knowledge of the MEP and how it impacts their students, I developed a series of questions listed at the end of this research paper entitled, "Appendix A - Interview Questions for Classroom Teachers." To ascertain the program benefits and restrictions, I developed a questionnaire entitled, "Appendix B - Interview Questions for MCOE Representative," which is also included at the end of this paper. Finally, to understand what, if anything, parents understood about the MEP, whether or not their children were participants, or even eligible to participate in the program, I formulated an anonymous survey entitled, "Appendix C - Anonymous Survey for Parents/English" and for the majority of parents who were not English speakers, a translation of this document was included on the reverse, and is listed as, "Appendix D - Anonymous Survey for Parents/Spanish."

Results and Findings:

1. *What is the Migrant Education Program (MEP)? How did the MEP develop and continue to evolve?*

The Migrant Education Program (MEP) is part of the Title I, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and was reauthorized fifty years later in 2015 in the Every Child Succeeds Act (Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE), 2021). This program is monitored closely for adherence to the guidelines, and there is a 5% random re-interview rate to help recognize misuse. In 1994, the requalification period was changed from every six years to every three years under the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), so that unqualified participants don't remain in the program longer than they should. This same Act also expanded the definition of a migrant student to include unaccompanied minors who are also

migrant workers, or who are married to a migrant worker, as well those who have a legal guardian who is a migrant worker (Madrid, 2019).

2. What does the research say about the impact of the MEP on the children of seasonal workers?

Although the literature indicates that, in general, both parents and teachers believe that the MEP benefits their children academically, and to some extent, socially, the teachers interviewed were not so sure. Two of the three teachers did not see any academic improvement in their migrant students in the past two or three years. To be fair, this time period coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, and also reassignment of the school's previous on-site Migrant Specialist. She was very involved with the migrant students and their families, personally tutored some of the students, and kept in contact with both parents and teachers. Since 2020, because of budget constraints, MCOE has reassigned another Migrant Specialist to this school (and who also services two other school districts) (C. Silva, personal communication, October 27, 2023), and two of the teachers who were interviewed did not know who served their school, how to contact them, or if they had any in-school contact with their students. They were aware of paperwork being routed to these students' families through the school, though.

3. Is there an MEP currently functioning in Monterey County? If there is, what is it?

Monterey County constitutes Region XVI of the Migrant Education Program in California, and is administered through the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE). MCOE provides direct services for all but five of the school districts in Monterey County, which are subgranted and maintain monthly reporting through the County Office. There have been approximately 8000 migrant students serviced per year in the Monterey County program over the past several years (C. Silva, personal communication, October 27, 2023).

4. What kinds of services does the program provide?

The MEP provides before- and after-school tutoring in Language Arts, Math, and STEM. They also participate in the statewide Speech and Debate competition, hold an annual Summer Migrant Program (a 4-week summer school), employs migrant college students through the Mini-Corps Program to tutor elementary school students in their classrooms, prepare 3-5 year olds for school readiness, prepare and inspire high-schoolers for college, and facilitate needed health care or social services for migrant families. They also provide a space and support for parent groups, especially for pre-schoolers, to help parents encourage their children in their education. (C. Silva, personal communication, October 27, 2023)

5. How are migrant children identified as possibly being eligible for the program? What causes the parents of some of the eligible children not to utilize MEP services?

The primary vehicles for identifying qualifying children are school enrollment forms, if students are self-identified as migrants, or through the intercession of Identification and Recruitment recruiter. After an interview, the recruiter completes a Certificate of Eligibility and submits it for approval and processing. The family's demographic and school data is then entered into the federal Migrant Student Information Network (MSIN). Alternative routes to applying for the program are referrals by teachers, school counselors, principals and school secretaries, and individuals may also self-refer. Information is sometimes disseminated at worksites and community events like festival or flea markets (C. Silva, personal communication, October 27, 2023, MCOE, 2021).

6. Are there gaps in services that are needed to help migrant children succeed educationally and socially? Are there resources available to provide the needed services and better coordination between programs to serve migrant students? If there are, what are they?

The MEP is meant to be supplemental to resources that are provided at the school and district level. This is important because the MEP is only intended to provide services when a family is actively transient, and up to 36 months after certification. They can recertify, but there are stringent requirements and time limits that need to be met in order to reauthorize a certification. These school-based supports can only be augmented, not replaced by MEP resources. They will constitute the primary educational resources during migrant children's participation in the MEP, and continue after participation has ended, if still needed. There is also coordination of services between localities when families move to a different agricultural or fishing region for purposes of employment in that field. (C. Silva, personal communication, October 27, 2023).

Discussion

I have had a relationship with the school in question for the past five years, so I had anticipated hearing good things about the MEP in this school. When I had a closer association with the office and administration, I had a comfortable relationship with the then MEP worker, and saw her frequent interactions with her students, would see her push into classrooms for 1:1 or small group tutoring, and saw and heard many of her interactions with parents. She had a collegial relationship with the teachers, and there was information shared both ways that benefitted the students and their families. I saw her dedication to the 6th to 8th graders as she supported their participation in the regional Speech and Debate Competition. I donated to the blanket drive she coordinated for the families of her students. This was my perception of what the MEP encompassed. My knowledge of the program was limited, and also framed by my experience of this dedicated worker.

I have since found out that in theory, the MEP offers many more services than just these and should theoretically be an even stronger program. But based on the results of the few interviews I conducted, and the absence of parent surveys, I am saddened to see that this was a rarity and not the usual state of affairs. Most of the teachers at this school don't currently know who is supposed to be assigned to their school, and have not observed any tutoring being provided to their students. The only indication they have that students are enrolled in the program is that they occasionally receive communications to be sent home to parents. When I questioned the MEP representative at MCOE about this, I was told that the worker is also shared with two other school districts due to budget constraints, and I was advised to speak with the worker directly. She did not respond to my request for an interview. There are currently about 8,000 students in Monterey County being served by this program. I wonder what services they are actually receiving, if budget cuts or constraints are limiting what is actually being provided in the schools and in the community. I think that the personnel involved are good people with good intentions. The MEP Rep was a former migrant student himself and believes that at least half of his staff are as well. They obviously believe in the program because of their past experience with it, but seem to be overwhelmed by the numbers involved and the dearth of money to run the program.

Problems and Limitations

Most of the problems and limitations I experienced with my findings and results related to the small sample size and lack of engagement with my study. I had intentionally selected my target school because of the large number of farmworker families served by the school. Additionally, considering my former relationship with the school, and the background of some of

the teachers, I had expected a much more enthusiastic response to my requests for assistance or information. In particular, my emails and phone messages were never returned in response to permission to send home anonymous surveys to parents about their perceptions about the Migrant Education Program. This resulted in all my data about parent perceptions being based on my Literature Review, not field research. Only three teachers of the ten I appealed to were kind enough to respond in any fashion and provided answers to my interview questions.

Finally, the information provided from the Monterey County Office of Education was general in nature, and while a good starting point, I had also hoped to pinpoint the reasons for the recent decrease in services and relationships between the County-administered programs and the school/migrant students who were entitled to those services. To accomplish this, I was referred to the Program worker who was assigned to my target school, but she did not respond to my request for information.

Recommendations

In light of the problems and limitations I experienced with my study, I would recommend the following solutions: Further studies should be conducted with a larger sample size, and not be limited a single school. This would include schools from similar and different areas of Monterey County. Possibly a large number of surveys could be sent out via tools such as Google Forms, and a limited number of in-person interviews could be conducted from among the participants. This would also allow for a more random sampling of teachers, rather than choosing which teachers were requested to participate. I would suggest requesting a meeting with the principal(s) of schools for whom parent surveys were considered, directing the requests to the principal directly if necessary, to be certain that the request was actually relayed. Upon meeting

with the principal, I would provide the survey instrument, reiterate the reason for the request, and be prepared to negotiate. I would follow the same strategy for the Monterey County Program worker, and ensure an actual audience for my request. Finally, with sufficient responses, I would be able to more effectively demonstrate quantitative data to back up my assertions and findings, using graphs and/or charts that would readily illustrate the results of field research.

As far as implementation of the Migrant Education Program to its best use, I would recommend that school staff and administrators are diligent in identifying possible eligible students, and be persuasive to parents about the potential benefits their children will receive from participation in the program. Since funding is tied to the number of enrollees, an accurate assessment of qualified individuals will result in more funding being allocated to the proper areas. I would also suggest that a metric be developed to track implementation of the program by each school, and that teachers and parents are informed of the results of accountability. Parents should know what benefits they should expect their children to receive and what was actually received. Finally, program staff assigned to each site should be familiar to teachers, parents, and children, and should be accessible to all stakeholders within reasonable turn-around times if a concern needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

My Capstone seeks to delineate the impact the Migrant Education Program has on the academic achievement, social development, and future prosperity of the children and young adults it serves. In response to the historical poverty and lack of educational achievement common to migrant students and their families, the federal government created the Migrant Education Program, (Kofford, 2012) which has been administered through the U.S. Department

of Education since 1979. Its purpose is to alleviate the inequities faced by migrant families in the education of their children, health and welfare of the family, and prospects for the children's future. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge and validate the lived experiences, the home culture and home languages of migrant students, and to acknowledge them as a source of strength and pride, not of shame or embarrassment.

Although the idea of the MEP is a good one, and some of the subprograms are very beneficial to migrant students and their families, I fear that present financial and staffing circumstances may be preventing its most efficacious use, at least in Monterey County. This programming is vital to preventing generational migrancy in farmworker families, along with the attendant poverty, undereducation, and ill health this transient lifestyle affords its users (Green, 2010). The program has favorable perceptions, both from teachers and parents, and has allowed many formerly poor families to climb out of their dire circumstances into a stable middle-class lifestyle. We need to find the weaknesses in the current system and fix them, so this program will continue to benefit farmworker families in the future.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How long have you been working at this school?
2. What is your position; what grade do you teach?
3. Do you have migrant students in your class(es)?
4. How familiar are you with the Migrant Education Program as it functions in your school?

What can you tell me about it?

5. Do you know which, if any, of your students participate in this program? (If so, please do not identify them in this interview.)
6. For participating students, would you say that you see an improvement in their academic achievement related to the program? Do you see an apparent social benefit for participants?
7. Have you, or would you refer a student to the program? Do you know how to make that recommendation?
8. Is there anything else you would like to say about the program?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for MEP Representative

1. In what capacity do you serve the county's Migrant Education Program, and how long have you been affiliated with the program?
2. What kinds of services do you provide program participants and their families?
3. How are eligible students identified, and what is the process and length of time it takes for them to qualify?
4. Is it possible for applicants to apply directly, or be referred by someone other than a recruiter? If so, how?
5. What are the positions of MCOE/school staff who work directly with the enrolled students and their families? What are their responsibilities?
6. Do you see specific academic and social benefits or improvements for participants? If so, what are they? Is this quantifiable, and if so, what instruments do you use to measure gains, especially in academic achievement?
7. Do you feel that there are additional services that the program should provide but that aren't currently offered? Are you aware of other educational or social programs that may be able to supply these needs?
8. Is there a process for collaborating/cooperating with other county or state agencies to facilitate more continuity of educational services to children who must move with their parents to follow available work?
9. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like me to know about the MEP program?

Appendix C
Anonymous Survey Questions for Parents (English)

1. Do you or any member of your household work as a seasonal farm worker, and move, even for a short time, to another area to work? To another state?
2. Have you heard about the Migrant Education Program? If so, what do you know about it? If not, do you want to learn about it?
3. Have any of your children participated in the program? If yes, did your children benefit academically and or socially? How so?
4. If you are eligible, would you like to enroll your child(ren) in this program? If you would not like to enroll, are you willing to share the reason with me?
5. If you have participated in this program, are there suggestions you can make about what other services would be helpful but are not currently offered?

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your identity will be kept confidential.

Appendix D

Encuesta Anónima Preguntas para los Padres (En español)

1. ¿Trabaja usted o algún miembro de su hogar como temporero agrícola y se desplaza, aunque sea por poco tiempo, a otra zona para trabajar? ¿ A otro estado?
2. ¿Ha oído hablar del Programa de Educación para Migrantes? Si es así, ¿qué sabe al respecto? Si no es así, ¿desea conocerlo?
3. ¿Alguno de sus hijos ha participado en el programa? En caso afirmativo, ¿se beneficiaron sus hijos académicamente y socialmente? ¿Cómo es eso?
4. Si usted es elegible, ¿le gustaría inscribir a su(s) hijo(s) en este programa? Si no desea inscribirse, ¿está dispuesto a compartir la razón conmigo?
5. Si ha participado en este programa, ¿hay sugerencias que pueda hacer sobre qué otros servicios serían útiles pero que no se ofrecen actualmente?

Gracias por participar en esta encuesta. Su identidad se mantendrá confidencial.