

## **Migrant Education:**

### **A Student's and Teacher's Perspective**

#### **I. Introduction**

When we were first assigned this research project I thought long and hard to come up with a relevant topic that would be feasible to research and enjoyable at the same time. Because I love working with children and I was already doing so at Rural Opportunities Inc., I decided that researching primary education among migrant students would be the perfect research project for me. In researching primary education among migrant children, I wanted to find out if their educational process was different from the Anglo student's education. Where other students and teachers excepting of migrant students? Did the migrant students participate in class? Did the teachers call on the Hispanic students in order to get them to be active in the classroom? Were the migrant students included in recreational play? Did they want to be included or did they form their own clique? What types of behavioral problems of migrant students existed in the classroom? To complete such a project, I would need to talk to teachers from the schools in the area. Most importantly, however, I would need to get in touch with the students and establish some type of relationship so that they would be comfortable enough to talk to me intimately about the questions I needed answers to. Before I started researching this project, I thought that migrant students would be quite different from the other students in the aforementioned aspects of their primary education.

#### **Methodology:**

In order to successfully reach my goals and collect as much information as possible, it was going to be crucial for me to establish relationships with families that had children currently enrolled or who were eligible to attend particular elementary schools in the area. This task seemed to be impossible at first because I was working at ROI and I felt as though there were no contacts that would be able to lead me in the direction I needed to be going. I felt that all I was doing was babysitting young children that were not even in any type of educational program. It seemed to me that everyone in the class was progressing and I was stuck in a day care center. Even though I was having a wonderful time I felt that my work was irrelevant to the class objectives. I was beginning to get frustrated. Then one day I heard that there would be an opportunity for me to go on some home visits and meet these families that had children other than the ones that were enrolled in ROI's Migrant Head Start Program. This news shone new light in my direction. I began to feel as though I would be able to establish some relevant contacts and maybe even get to talk to some children in the homes.

On October 22, 1998. I went to my internship and planned on staying until the day was over at about 6:00pm. Then we would gather up what we needed and head out to visit four families. I was informed before I went out that there were only going to be two children that had older brothers and sisters. We arrived at Tania's family's apartment complex. I was able to talk to her brother, Javier, briefly about his schooling experiences. After a half hour spending time with his

family he started to answer some of my informal questions. This was my first breakthrough and it felt very rewarding.

We were off to see Rosalinda whom I was told had nine brothers and sisters! This was exciting information. I was going to get another chance to talk to a number of elementary students. I was getting a little worried however, because it was getting late and I feared that the kids would be in bed when we arrived. When we pulled in at Rosalinda's home her mother greeted us. Unfortunately, I did not see any children and I feared that there would be no one awake to talk to. Finally, after about twenty minutes of going over Rosa's paperwork and progress Rosa and her older sister came out of the back room. I was excited to see her and her sister but wondered where the rest of their siblings were. Unfortunately, I was only able to talk to Rosa's older sister Daniella, who is in third grade at Biglerville Elementary. She spoke English quite well, and often times she would translate for her mother when we would ask questions. I was able to talk to her briefly, again informally, but still informative. We left Rosa's home after about an hour. I was disappointed that I was not able to see or talk to the other kids in the family, but at the same time I was grateful that I had made contact with a migrant elementary student for the second time. I was also excited because I was on my way to establishing more contacts.

Finally I caught a larger break through Mrs. Beth Miller. She is a recruiter for LIU's Migrant Child Development Program. She had the names of several migrant families who were in the area and families that have just arrived here in Pennsylvania. She visits these home and sees if there are children that will be eligible for her program. I initially met her at the 7-11 in Biglerville and learned that she was fluent in Spanish, something that would prove to be a great help. We stayed in Biglerville and headed to the home of Pablo and Maria Rodriguez. They lived in a very nice home with 15 other people! The two of them had four children of their own. Their names were Veronica, Jorge, Fabiola, and Victor. Their ages spanned from eight, seven, three years, and five months respectively. Veronica, who is in third grade and Jorge, who is in the first grade attended Biglerville Elementary School and we were able to talk with them for a while. Again, it was brief, but we were able to get some quality information from the children. Estela's brother and his wife were also living in the house with their two children. When I met Estela's brother he asked me if was familiar with computers and I told him I knew some things about them. Of all the families we have visited I believe that this family was the friendliest and most outgoing. We were able to talk to the parents about their children and their own lives. We stayed there for over an hour and we promised that we would return and spend more time talking with the kids.

Erica, Mrs. Miller, and I made our way to Jesus and Teresa Lopez's apartment complex on N. Main St. in Biglerville. They had three children named Ruben, Maria, and Rogelio. They were ten, eight, and two years old respectively. Ruben and Maria attended Biglerville Elementary School as well. They were in the fifth and second grade. As I mentioned in my journal, this is where I saw Carina and Tania, my two kids I also knew from ROI. When we arrived at the Lopez's Maria was there with her mother helping out with the babysitting. Erica and I had a chance to talk to Maria about how she felt going to school in the United States. Fortunately, Maria was outgoing and seemed perfectly comfortable talking with us about the sometimes-touchy subject. Maria spoke English pretty well assisted when we tried to communicate with Roselia. Ruben arrived about 45 minutes later with his father and younger brother. We talked to

Ruben as well and he acted the same way his sister did towards us. He was very pleasant and a joy to be around. Jesus, their father, was a great man. I always expected the father of the house to be shy and not as talkative, but he was just the opposite. He was very pleasant towards Erica and I and was willing to talk about his job and his future plans for his family. The Lopez's turned out to be a very delightful and beneficial contact.

### **Findings/Analysis:**

Throughout my journeys into Biglerville and Gettysburg I was able to visit a lot of elementary schools and actual homes of migrant families. When I went on my first home visits, I saw first hand how migrant families interact with one another. I would have to say that even though these families do not have a lot of money; the majority of them are happy and absolutely love one another to death. One observation I had while visiting these homes was that the children often had to translate for their parents. One case that sticks out in my mind is that of Rosalinda's older sister Daniella. She could not have been more than seven years old and her English was outstanding. She was able to hold a conversation with any one of us at the table. It was incredible. I have been around Rosalinda and she does not speak that much English. I think this shows that the ESL programs that the Pennsylvania school districts fund are pretty effective. I remember going to visit Mrs. Lightman (teacher) and she had two sisters in her class, Maribell and Rosalina. They had just arrived here in the summer and now, five and a half months later, their English had progressed quite nicely. I think that these programs are doing a lot for the migrant students. After visiting Mrs. Smith at Bermudian Springs and Mrs. Lightman at Keefauver Elementary and sitting in on their classes I would have say that the ESL programs in the Pennsylvania area are worth while and quite beneficial. I believe that the migrant students are receiving the adequate ESL training/survival language that they will need to prosper and break out of the migrant stream if they choose to do so. I think it is a great thing because their parents have not had the opportunity to do this.

Another aspect of the migrant student's education that I was able to learn about was how these students interact with the other students in the school as well as one another. When I visited Bermudian Springs I was able to talk to Victor about his friends in school. He told Erica and I that he associated himself primarily with the kids in his ESL classes. Mrs. Smith told us that the kids felt much more comfortable in her class than they do in their other classes. It was like a safe haven for them. She also told me that the other students in her class felt the same way. They enjoyed hanging out with kids from their ESL classes rather than the Anglo students. We had a chance to see the children at Bermudian Springs interact at recess time. They were not aware that we were watching them so it was more natural. They could not pretend. What I observed is that indeed, the migrant students did have a tendency to stick around each other. It was very interesting to watch. When Erica and I returned to Mrs. Smith's class three weeks later we had the opportunity to sit in on a class that was not an ESL class. I was interested to see if the children would be able to interact with one another. What I saw was that the Hispanic students were more apt to be with the other Hispanic students. The teachers did a good job by trying to mix the children together at the tables. However, when it came time to do projects and the children were on their own, the Hispanic students would flock to one another. They shared ideas about their projects. There were times when they would speak Spanish to one another so no one in the room could understand them. The teachers discouraged this but they could only monitor

the kids for so long. I am not categorizing all the Hispanic students, but the majority of them preferred to be with one another. I was happy because I felt that visiting these schools helped me learn a lot about the way the migrant students acted in a social environment as well as how the Anglo students behaved in the presence of Hispanic students. I also was able to observe how the Hispanic students behaved around two different teachers. When we visited Mrs. Smith's classroom I could tell that the migrant students felt that she was their friend and she would be there as a protector. On the opposite end of the spectrum, when we went to do an oral history with Judy Hisey she stated I don't think they embrace or are openly enthusiastic when they have a migrant child come into their classroom because it is more work. It just makes it more difficult, and I don't think it's looked on as a plus that these children come from Spanish speaking homes (Oral History, Hisey). When we sat in on the other class with the Anglo students and other teachers I could sense that the migrant students felt uneasy. It wasn't quite as safe for them. They did not participate as much and they kept to themselves.

When we visited the homes of the migrant families we seemed to get a somewhat different response. I would have to say that all of the migrant children that we visited and spoke to said that they enjoyed going to school. They all told us that they liked their teachers and they had a lot of friends, both Hispanic and Anglo. I thought this was quite interesting. When we visited the Lopez's home I remember talking to Ruben and Maria and the two of them were not even enrolled in any ESL classes. Their English had become so well spoken that they no longer needed the ESL programs! To me, this meant that the two of them interacted with Anglo students every day, all day. They did not have a safe haven to go to. By safe haven I mean, a place where the migrant students felt comfortable and at ease. This was a place where the students were free to talk in English as well as Spanish and not feel awkward. Although English was the main concern in an ESL class, the teachers did designate times when it was perfectly acceptable for the students to speak their first language. When we visited Tania's apartment and I had a chance to talk to her older brother Javier, he told me the same. He enjoyed going to school and his teachers were great. He too, no longer was enrolled in any ESL classes. When we visited the Rodriguez's and spoke to Veronica and Jorge, they told us that they enjoyed school and they had plenty of friends. Their parents told Erica and me that the two siblings were still enrolled in ESL classes because their English could still use some improvement. However, they seemed to enjoy themselves. In fact, they told us that they were bored and wished they were in school. They weren't however, because there were teacher conferences. They told me that they wanted to be in school with their friends and playing. I asked them if they had a lot of friends that were Hispanic as well as non-Hispanic. They did not understand the question at first but Mrs. Miller was able to explain it to them. When they figured out what my question was asking they told me that it did not matter what color their friends were and that they liked a bunch of different kids in their class. One interesting statement that they made was that their friends never came over to play. They only socialized with their friends in school. The only children they played with at home were their relatives (brothers, sisters, cousins, etc). I thought that was quite interesting. It raised some questions in my mind. Were the children embarrassed to have friends from school over? Were the parents embarrassed to have children from school visit their home? It was good to talk to several different students from various elementary schools. This way we were able to collect different points of view from them. Unfortunately, as I left these homes, I felt as though there were questions left unanswered. I hoped that I would be able to get the answers, but it did not

look promising. I believe that there are reasons for these different points of view and plan to devote the following paragraphs to explaining these differences.

The first thing I noticed when I spoke to these kids was that I was talking to some of them at home and some of them at school. This often creates a bias. On the one hand the kids are stating their opinions in front of their teacher. In this case their ESL teacher. Their ESL teacher, to them is a person that provides a safe haven and is the protector of the isolation they feel when interacting with other students in the school. The students feel as though they can express their feelings the way they want to. They come into the classroom and they can express how they feel because they are with kids that are in similar predicaments. In this type of situation the truth will come out. One other thing I would like to mention is, when we spoke to the children at Bermudian Springs, more times than not Mrs. Smith would repeat the question for them in order to get them to speak. I believe that when they hear her speak, they feel a sense of comfort and are going to express how they truly feel no matter whom is present.

On the other hand, when we spoke to the children at home the responses were completely opposite. I asked myself why this could be? Well, I believe that the children know what their parents want to hear and that is that they are having a wonderful time at school and they have plenty of friends. Also I think the kids are telling us what they think we want to hear. I do not believe that they would feel comfortable telling us that they are having a terrible time at school and that the teachers in their regular classes do not pay any attention to them. They want us to think that they have a lot of friends. As a matter of fact I cannot think of any child, minority or Anglo, that would feel comfortable telling others that they have no friends or their teachers do not like them. What I think has happened here is that we put these kids in a situation where they feel put on the spot. They are uncomfortable so they panic and tell us answers that sound good to them. We did not have enough time to establish a relationship with these kids so that they would feel comfortable telling us the truth about their schooling and the problems that go along with it. It is a real shame because I would have liked to have gotten some truthful answers from these students. However, I am not blaming these kids for feeling uncomfortable. I cannot tell you how I would feel if some strangers came into my home and started asking me how I felt about school and did I have any friends. It is a very awkward situation for these kids to be in, not to mention ourselves. I'll admit, I did not feel totally comfortable asking these kids questions about their social life. It was very difficult at times.

I believe that another reason we could have been receiving different answers is because we were talking to kids from two completely different school districts. When we went to the actual school to talk to the kids we were at Bermudian Springs. Now it could be that the Anglo students are nastier there and they have a real problem interacting with the migrant students. I am not dismissing that possibility. Other migrant students that we visited all attended Biglerville Elementary. It is quite possible that the Anglo students at Biglerville are nicer and more open to an increase of migrant students. Again, that is completely possible. It is hard to tell what this could all mean. Still another possibility is this. We are dealing with several different kids that are likely to have different personalities. There may be some kids that more outgoing than others. There may be some that would just assume keep to themselves or associate only with their own kind just to avoid creating an awkward situation. There are so many different types of personalities among young student that it is hard to put the blame solely on discrimination. I

would have to say that there were no true explanations for why these kids come up with the answers they did. It is hard to be a young kid in this day in age. I believe that all kids, no matter where they are from, have a difficult time growing up.

### **Conclusion/Problems:**

After collecting this information and analyzing it, I have come to the conclusion that these migrant students have had a rough time in school. I believe that being a minority in today's society is a very tough thing to deal with. When you are young and in school, some kids will act strangely towards you. I got the impression talking to these children as well as observing them that the only time they feel 100% comfortable is when they are in their ESL classes. Of course, this excludes the children that we spoke to at home. I felt badly for these migrant students. I felt as though a majority of the Anglo students did not want anything to do with them. That is why I believe it is extremely hard to go to school as a minority. Some do not speak English all that well and that is an obvious obstacle to overcome. As for their social lives, I would have to say that the best example I had for proving that these migrant students do indeed stick to themselves is the example I gave in the aforementioned paragraph about the kids at Bermudian Springs. I do not think it gets much clearer than that. Do I think that migrant students act out in class? Not at all. After being in their classroom and seeing how they behaved, I would have to say absolutely not. However, it could all have been a show for the audience. The children that I spoke to in the homes and in the classroom seemed really well behaved and seemed as though they were in school to learn and take advantage of the opportunity to receive a quality education. I think the behavioral problems play a factor when a student comes to school for the first time and they enter right into high school. I spoke with a student at Bermudian springs High School and he told me that he often got himself involved in fights because of his race. He believed that the Anglo students are either not friendly towards him and if they were it was because of fear. I asked him what he meant by that and he told me that when you are a different color you can sense that others have this unconscious fear of you. I did not quite understand what he meant by that. Nevertheless I accepted what he told me. He was an excellent athlete as well. He felt that some of his Afriends@ associated with him for that sole purpose. He told me that he has received only one or two blatant racist remark to his face. Unfortunately, it resulted in a fight. He felt as though many students made comments but not to his face. High school is so much more brutal than elementary school. I believe that the migrant students that are in the elementary schools right now have a very legitimate chance of being successful and breaking out of the migrant stream if they choose to do so.

### **(Other)Problems:**

I believe that I have already touched on the major problem with this type of research project. It is the lack of quality time we had to establish relationships with the migrant families in order to be comfortable enough to get some truthful answers. I felt as though I was starting to breakthrough to these children but it came down to the wire and I could not spend the time I felt was required to do adequate research. I believe that one of the biggest problems for me was the internship that I was involved with. I had an absolutely wonderful time spending time with the little kids.

Several of the children really got attached to me. At the same time, I felt I was getting equally attached. I was extremely sad to leave ROI because of the relationships I had with the children there. However, it took a solid two months for me to really get close with these kids. I am willing to bet that if they could talk I would have been able to collect some quality information from them. Information that was real and truthful because they would have been comfortable around me. There were just no possible contacts for me at the Migrant Head Start Program. When they finally presented themselves, it was only a one-time visit and one could only get so much quality information from one visit. Not only does one have to establish good relationships with the kids but you have to gain the trust of the parents as well.