

Adult Education for Migrants

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Migrant workers haven't taken advantage of adult education programs for two main reasons: (1) education hasn't become a part of their life style and (2) they see formal education programs as not meeting their needs. The author suggests various ways adult education might become involved in migrant education. He says: ". . . it has been recognized that, apart from direct financial help, migrant workers' conditions could best be improved by providing education designed to equip them with usable, marketable skills."

Minority Groups

Much has been written recently about the plight of various minority groups within our society. One group often overlooked, however, is the migrant farm workers—perhaps the most impoverished, undereducated, and ignored of all minority groups. Society has tended to treat this group as a nonentity, which has resulted in social and economic injustices of tremendous magnitude. Some people believe that these injustices are inevitable or insurmountable, and, therefore, we need not even try to alleviate them. Because of this, these injustices are reinforced and perpetuated, and the migrants are captives of society's apathy.

Various agencies and organizations have tried to help overcome the migrants' problems. Some attempts have been successful. In almost every case, it has been recognized that, apart from direct financial help, migrant workers' conditions could best be improved by providing education designed to equip them with usable, marketable skills. These skills would ultimately remove them from the mainstream of the migratory labor force. This concept is applicable when you consider migrants who live and work in Missouri.

General Characteristics of Migrants

Missouri's migrant farm labor

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population reflects the general characteristics of all migrant farm laborers. Most are male Caucasians who are poor and underpaid, far beyond the imagination of most people. They're undereducated, without more than a grade school education. They're young, and they're facing the pressures of agricultural mechanization.

Most migrants, when they're working, earn approximately \$7.75 a day. For a Missouri migrant, the median daily earnings is \$8.05.¹ In some cases, this figure includes room and board; in others, one of the two; and in still others, neither. Living quarters, generally provided by the farm employer or growers association, are, under most circumstances, unsanitary, intolerable hovels. The temporary nature of the job and the close profit margin of the farming business don't lend themselves to worker benefits above those of the absolute minimum.

The advantages of education have eluded the migrant worker for two reasons: (1) he hasn't been educationally oriented in his life style and (2) he views formal education programs as irrelevant to his needs.

The children attend schools only intermittently and only when it's convenient for the family; most commonly, parents view school as a day-care situation freeing them to work in the fields without hindrance. As soon as the kids are old enough to take care of themselves during the day, family pressure to ride the school bus in the morning decreases considerably.

Not long after that the fields claim the migrant young and their meager earnings become a family supplement Thus the spiral continues: low educational level, low pay, hungry and neglected children, schools foreign to the language patterns and the culture of the children, early separation from school, and finally, another generation of low pay and subsequent misery.²

Several surveys have tried to measure the educational attainment level of migrant workers. A 1965 Bureau of Labor Statistics survey concluded that:

. . . more than one-half of the migratory farm workers had not attended school beyond the eighth grade and less than one-fifth had completed high school. For the group as a whole, the median number of school years completed was 8.5.³

These findings, as appalling as they are, show improvement when compared with those of the 1954 Migrant Research Project Board survey.⁴ This survey found that less than one-fourth of the 665 migrant families interviewed had more than a fourth-grade education.

Despite the fact that the educational level of migrants has increased in recent years, the present level of 8.5 years is far below the national average of 12.1 years.⁵ This situation must be remedied.

Contrary to popular belief, migrant farm laborers are generally young people. In 1966, more than one-half were 24 years or younger,

and men migrants outnumbered women by a ratio of 2 to 1.⁶ The work in the fields and on the farms requires great physical effort and, therefore, is less suited to women or older workers.

Perhaps the most critical problem facing migrant workers today is the increasing pressure of agricultural mechanization and modernization on the farm. New farming techniques and advanced technology have brought with them a decrease in the total number of farms and a lesser demand for those involved in unskilled and semiskilled agricultural work.⁷ For the migrant worker this has meant fewer jobs and a decrease in the skill requirements necessary for the jobs that remain. The result of this situation isn't clear. However, technology will continue to advance, and those jobs presently held by migrants will become fewer and fewer, forcing many migrant workers to seek employment elsewhere.

Specific Characteristics of Missouri's Migrants

Statistics available for Missouri show that out of a rural population of 1,443,256 in 1960, 19,600 persons were engaged in seasonal agricultural employment (50% of one's total work time in the year was devoted to farming and the person remained attached to his local community throughout the year) and 12,000 persons were engaged in migratory farm labor. Of these 12,000, 60 percent were classified as "in-mi-

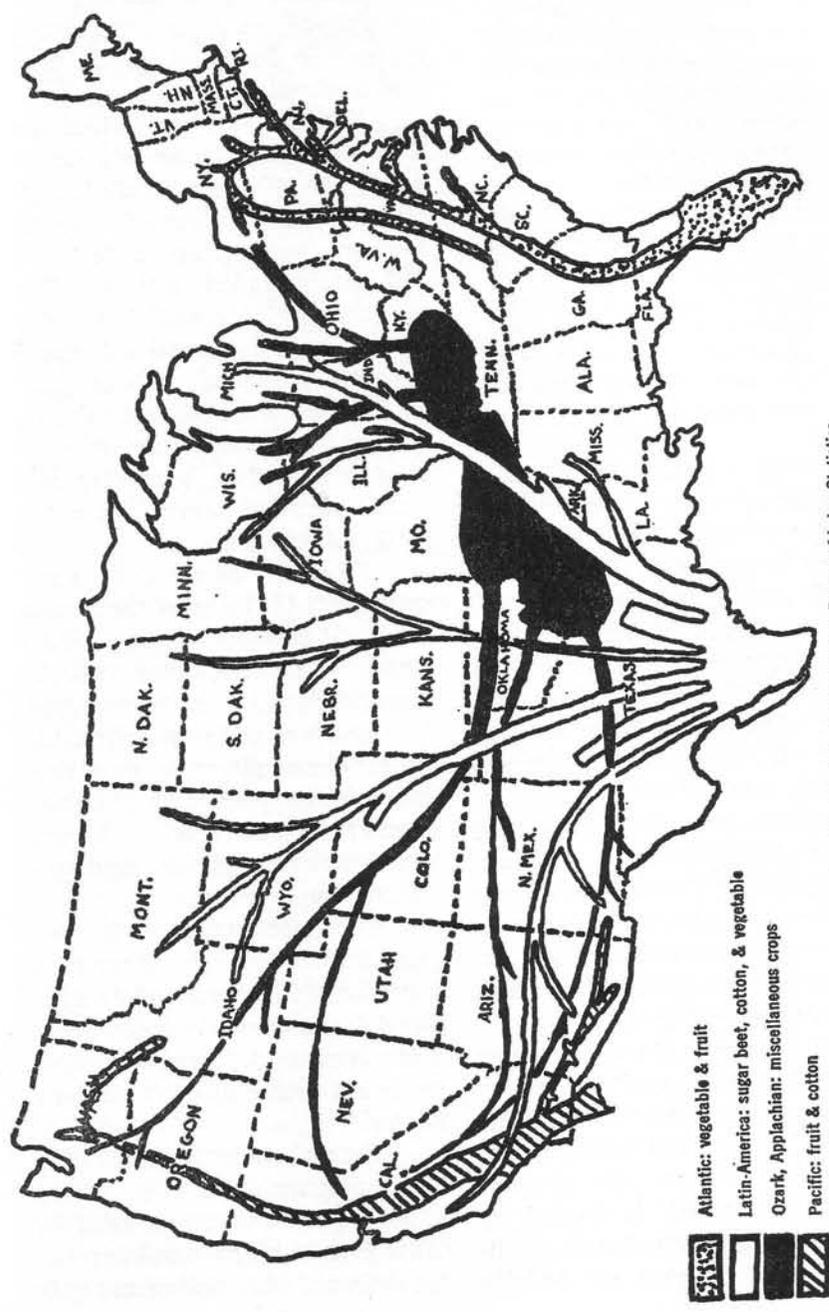
grants"—domestic migrant workers who follow a particular crop throughout the state and then return to their home base. The remaining 40 percent were classified as "out-migrants"—those migrating to Missouri for a particular season and then moving on to another state.⁸

Most migrant farm work in Missouri is concentrated in the southeast "Bootheel" section, with the principal crops being cotton and soybeans. Recently, however, a limited amount of truck farming has been going on in the Chesterfield-Gumbo area of St. Louis County in which migrant workers have been used to help plant and harvest various vegetable crops. Those out-migrants who come to this state are a part of the Latin-American migrant flow pattern (Figure 1)⁹ which originates in south Texas and moves up through the Ozarks, terminating in the Great Lakes Region.

Some Attempted Solutions

You can now see that the migrant workers of our society are truly disadvantaged and need outside help. Despite the migrants' regrettable disenchantment with our education system, some form of an effective adult education program adapted to their needs is one of the best ways to help. The National Education Association's Migrant Research Project Board concluded its survey of migrant workers by recommending that:

1. Local school boards, with the cooperation of agricultural ex-



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Figure 1. Flow patterns of migratory farm workers in the United States.

tension and home demonstration services and other adult education agencies, organize and promote adult education classes for migrants in such areas as English language (for Spanish speaking), parent education, health and nutrition, home arts, practical arithmetic, economic problems and other subjects adapted to their needs.

2. Local school districts provide young adult classes among migrants designed to overcome deficiencies in their formal schooling and to aid them in preparation for mature life and parenthood.¹⁰

Many agencies and organizations have tried to implement various types of adult education programs for migrants. Local school boards and school districts haven't been as active in this area as the Migrant Research Project Board recommended. The most active agency is the Migrant Division of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which, either directly or indirectly, is currently administering almost 100 of these programs throughout the United States. These programs range in scope from basic literacy and general educational development to vocational training and family education.

In Missouri, the only agency conducting any adult education programs for migrant workers is the Missouri Associated Migrant Opportunity Services, Incorporated (MAMOS), which is funded by OEO. MAMOS is a nonprofit organization that operates six training

centers in six counties of southeast Missouri—Pemiscot, New Madrid, Dunklin, Scott, Stoddard, and Mississippi—as well as cooperative projects in Joplin, Appleton City, and Neelyville.

With \$857,889 from Title III-B of the Equal Opportunity Act of 1964, MAMOS has enrolled in its programs 200 stipended trainees who are heads of households, and 187 nonstipended trainees. The programs include: adult basic education, general educational development, vocational training, pre-employment counseling, on-the-job training, follow-up after employment, and various supportive services directed at serving the entire family of the trainee.

To qualify as a trainee, a migrant must: (1) be below the poverty level (\$1,500 for a single farm worker with an additional \$500 per dependent), (2) be unemployed, (3) have worked in agriculture but not for one employer for more than one calendar year, and (4) have earned at least 50 percent of his previous year's gross income from agricultural employment.

Once accepted into the program, heads of households receive a stipend of \$40 a week and an additional \$4 for every dependent up to a maximum of 5. Those who aren't heads of households don't receive a stipend.¹¹

The main objective of the MAMOS program, and most of the other migrant programs funded by OEO, is to provide the trainees with the skills and education necessary to

remove them from the migrant labor stream. Hopefully, this training will secure employment that provides higher wages and thus raises the migrant from the poverty level to one of relative financial stability.

At this point, it's impossible to say whether the MAMOS program or similar migrant education programs have been successful, since most have been operating for only a short time. Preliminary findings indicate that the majority of the trainees do complete their training period and are placed on jobs. However, these trainees are generally the in-migrants. The out-migrants are usually never reached.

Implications for Other Agencies

The work of MAMOS alone isn't enough to solve the many problems of the migrant worker. A more expanded effort is needed. Some day federal funds may no longer be available. Then the choice will be simply, "to help or not to help."

Because of the pace of advancing technology, the need to provide expanded educational opportunities as well as vocational training, retraining, and upgrading is even more apparent. Each year more agricultural jobs are being eliminated, making it increasingly difficult for migrant workers to find decent employment. Training migrants so they can move out of the migrant labor stream into high paying, more stable jobs has much merit. The question before us now is: "How can we train migrants fast enough?"

This can't be done by a single agency when the demand is so great. Increased participation and involvement by other adult agencies operating within the state is needed.

Some suggestions on how this greater involvement might be accomplished are:

1. Establishment of day-care centers for migrant children thus freeing parents to attend school.
2. Use of mobile libraries and classrooms that could easily be moved from farm site to farm site thereby providing continual educational opportunities for the workers.
3. Establishment of an operational policy of the U.S. Bureau of Employment Security to recommend workers only to those farmers who have provided for some type of educational program for their workers.
4. Better use of ad hoc staff to teach basic and remedial classes thereby freeing full-time, professional staff for job development and job placement responsibilities.
5. Increased opportunity for migrants to become involved in local community affairs and to meet local citizenry.
6. Development of migrant education specialists who will act as educational referral agents between the workers and the various educational agencies in any area where migrants have relocated.

Admittedly, this list of suggestions isn't definitive, nor will all the suggestions be appropriate in any given situation. The fact remains, however, that migrant workers need help and adult education agencies haven't been fully utilized in this effort. Perhaps this has been a voluntary neglect on the part of the agencies themselves, perhaps involuntary. Whatever the motivation, adult education can play a positive role in helping to alleviate the problems of migratory farm laborers, thereby making them better citizens, better workers, and more satisfied human beings.

Footnotes

1. Robert C. McElroy, Agricultural Economics Report No. 148, *The Hired Farm Working Force in 1967* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 17.
2. E. John Kleinert, "The Florida Migrant," *Phi Delta Kappan*, X (October, 1969), 91.
3. "The Migratory Farm Worker," *The Monthly Labor Review*, XCI (June, 1968), 12.
4. Shirley E. Greene, *The Education of Migrant Children: A Study of the Educational Opportunities and Experiences of Agricultural Migrants* (Washington, D.C.: The Department of Rural Education of the National Education Association, 1954), p. 113.
5. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Series P-20, No. 181, *Current Population Reports* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 9.
6. "Migratory Farm Worker," p. 12.
7. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1969 Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 233.
8. *Missouri Annual Farm Labor Report of 1968* (Jefferson City, Missouri: Missouri Division of Employment Security, 1968), pp. 2-3.
9. Greene, *Education of Migrant Children*, p. xii.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
11. Information received in an interview with Rod Miller, executive director of MAMOS, April 13, 1970.