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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the culture and background of the Chicano migrant child and with his frustrations and conflicts in encountering the Anglo culture as represented by the school. It is pointed out that the Chicano migrant child, whose home base is in the Rio Grande Valley, lives in either a barrio or, in summer, a migrant camp and has little contact with the Anglo culture until he enters school; that the only contacts his parents have with the Anglo community are with the farmer, grocer, gas station attendant, and clergyman; that upon entering school, the migrant child finds himself in an educational environment which is totally foreign to him; and that after being unable to learn because of his inability to understand English, the Chicano migrant child usually does not return to school. Suggestions to correct the problem and to provide the child with an equal learning opportunity include (1) that teachers of Spanish-speaking children must understand the migrant child, his culture, and his problems; (2) that English must be taught as a second language; (3) that until the child speaks English, he should be taught in Spanish; and (4) that the teacher must show the child that someone cares and wants him to learn, thus engendering in the child a desire to learn. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (FF)

THE CHICANO MIGRANT CHILD

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The Chicano[2] migrant child just as any other child drawn from his culture, utilizes his culture as a point of departure in the establishment of his identity. The Chicano migrant child experiences a sense of security only if he recognizes a part of his culture in his immediate environment. To understand fully the implications of this statement, one must understand his background as well as his frustrations and conflicts in the middle-class structure. The Chicano migrant child, in most cases, has his home-base in the Rio Grande Valley. He lives in a Spanish community called a barrio. The barrio is comprised of Spanish-speaking families that are drawn together by similarity of language, culture and economic level. The barrio embraces the culture of Mexico, a culture which has demonstrated its indistructability and resiliency. It has defied the Anglo's timetable of assimilation and acculturation which has worked to perfection with other minorities in this country. It has survived years of Anglo exploitation in the form of school segregation, descrimination in public facilities, and gross display of inequality. It also has surmounted obstacles such as poverty, irrelevant education in the schools, and political isolation.

The Chicano culture has derived its strength from the tenacious character of its people, a people who have continued to remain responsive to their own traditional values that have evolved from the carnelismo[3] and compadragge[4] of La Raza (the race). These values are inculcated by the Chicano in his formative years, they produce strength and resilience. The

Chicano migrant child is proud of his culture and demonstrates it with extreme pride. He is happy and content living in the barrio. The adults and his peers accept him and respect his viewpoints. Spanish is prevalent; therefore, he has no difficulty in expressing himself. The barrio offers him the peace, tranquility, and identity that no other community offers him. He values the barrio and his Mexican heritage, which is expressed in terms of pride and loyalty to "La Raza."

As May rolls around, the cry "Vamonos pal norte" is heard around the barrio. The trip to a northern state is both exhilarating and wearisome. In many instances his father knows his destination in the northern state and also realizes that his stay in any area is dictated by the crop and by nature. This means that the migrant family may reside in two or more communities, but not be a member of them.

On their arrival in the northern state, their living quarters are in a migrant camp. These camps, for the most part, are old, dilapidated and unsanitary. Many of these camp-houses are without windows and doors. The furnishings provided by the farmer for the most part are just a bed with a spring and a small stove. The outhouse is filthy and unsanitary and is used by every person in the migrant camp. There is generally one water pump to service all the water needs of the families. In these camps, there are no shower facilities, which means that the migrants must wash themselves as best as they can in their own living quarters. These wretched camps become living quarters for the migrants during the harvest.

In viewing the people, the establishment of a sense of community in the migrant camp is no problem. Spanish is prevalent just as it was

in Texas. Thus, within the migrant camp a barrio is formed with all the characteristics of the barrio in Texas. The migrant child feels the same security in the migrant camp that he felt in Texas. His new friends, like those in Texas, are poor but proud. He begins to experience the same sense of belonging that he experienced in his home-base in Texas.

The only contacts that his parents have with the nearby Anglo community is with the farmer, grocer, gas station attendants and clergyman. The migrant child's first contact with the community is his first day of school. Thus, his first contact with the Anglo culture is an educational system in which all classes are taught in English by teachers who do not understand or accept him. Thomas P. Carter (1970) reflects upon this idea and suggests that:

> "Teachers are not unlike other middle-class citizens. They almost universally see their role and that of the school to be one of encouraging the poor and foreign to become full-fledged middle-class Americans, they genuinely and willingly desire to help Mexican-Americans, but they don't necessarily like them or accept them as they are.'

The migrant child realizes that the programs are specifically designed for instruction in English, grossly neglecting those who cannot speak or understand the English language. He finds himself in a educational environment which is totally foreign to him. The use of English as the sole medium of communication is undoubtedly a chronic mistake and an injustice to him. Is not the basic concept in public education to provide equal learning opportunity? Every child, regardless of race and language should be given equal facilities, equal instruction and equal

incentive to realize his potential. In line with this idea, Julian Nava (1970) concludes that:

> "The teaching of English in public schools has certain social and psychological consequences that many instructors and administrators may not fully realize. Guided by the melting pot theory, it has been an assumption among educators that instruction was for a basically homogeneous student population which was already English speaking. This is not the case in most of the Southwest, where perhaps four million people have Spanish as a native language. For these people English is a second language. [The Chicano migrant child is a product of the Southwest.]
>
> The objectives of schools and teachers are very difficult for Spanish-speaking people to achieve because of their bilingual situation. From Kindergarten on, the encounter with education spoken in an alien tongue (English), produces in the Spanish-speaking child various profound impressions which are often destructive."

The migrant child is often viewed by the teacher as being intellectually inferior to his fellow students, for his inability to understand English is viewed as intellectual inferiority. His teacher supplies him with an achievement test to determine his grade level. The teacher feels that his objective test will help determine his grade placement. The teacher fails to understand that the score indicates products of peculiar social and cultural circumstances and indeed indications of deficiency in testing procedure. Often the I.Q. test does not indicate the true intellectual level of the child but rather it is a measure of his acculturation. Thus, the migrant child is adjudged at a lower intellectual level than he really is because of his lack of understanding of the dominant culture and language. (See Philip D. Ortego: 1971) [5] As a result, he is placed a couple of grades behind Anglo youngsters of his

own age. Beacuse of his grade placement, he becomes very shy and sits at the rear of the class. He is reluctant to speak or read in class for fear of making a mistake in English and suffering the ridicule of his classmates. One must realize that the migrant child is extremely self-conscious due to his inability to speak English in an efficient manner.

The next day and the days that follow, the migrant child claims sickness and does not return to school. His decision to drop out of school is not difficult to make. In the school he felt isolated from the rest of the class; also he began to nourish a feeling of inferiority because of his inability to compete and to survive in the middle-class educational system. In the migrant camp, he feels secure and happy. This is where he belongs. Here he suffers no frustration and conflict as he did in school.

The school has fulfilled its lawful responsibility as dictated by the state, but has failed miserably in its sole function in educating the migrant child as any other student in the community. The school has failed to realize that when poverty is accompanied by language difficulties, small success with school work and rejection by others, the situation becomes very close to being hopeless. There is little wonder that many migrant youths develop a feeling of futility and resolve early in life to give up the struggle.

But the situation is not a hopeless one to be dismissed by claiming that this migrant child is someone else's responsibility. A more thorough analysis of conditions show that much can be done to rekindle hope and to substantially raise the level of achievement of the migrant

child. Every child needs to taste success and to enjoy prestige. The migrant child, as other children, has his confidence strengthened by real success and by being given the symbols and rewards that go with success. The school must mobilize its resources -- the library, curriculum, laboratories, staff, etc. -- to accommodate the migrant child.

The teacher holds the most vital position in relation to the migrant child. He is the reference point of the many educational activities in relation to the migrant child. Here is where the weakness or strength of the program has its most direct and most devastating or helpful influence on the migrant child. The teacher of the Spanish-speaking child should understand the migrant child, his culture and problems. He should teach English as a second language and must realize that the migrant child should be taught many things which a large number of other children have learned outside of the school. The teacher must be a person with empathy for the migrant child and one with whom the migrant child can identify.

In viewing the Chicanos, it is important for the educational system or any other system to realize that there is a need for a more complete integration of the Chicano into the opportunity structure of American life; however, the complete assimilation at the expense of his ethnic heritage is neither practical nor desirable.

In addition, one must also remember that English is often a foreign language to the migrant child. Curricula are specifically designed for instruction in English. Thus, the child who cannot speak or understand the language is denied the opportunity to learn. Such a child cannot learn and can only find school to be a fruitless and

frustrating experience; consequently, the responsibility to meet the language difficulties of the migrant child must be recognized. If a school system is to successfully educate, they must be able to communicate with the student. Thus, the child who cannot speak English must be taught in Spanish until he can understand English.

The above suggests that the school system that accepts the migrant child also accepts the responsibility to develop programs that will allow him to learn. The migrant child upon his arrival in a school system often cannot speak English. Consequently, if he is to learn he must be taught in Spanish. In addition he also must be taught to both speak and understand English and this should also be taught in Spanish. This would mean that the migrant child does not lose during the transitional phase and does not have to experience the feeling of being unable to learn because of his inability to understand the language.

The migrant child is damaged psychologically when he is placed in a situation where he is not expected to learn because of his language problems. The teacher expects a sub-par performance from him and fails to offer an academic challenge to him. The teacher, then, gets what he expects (see Jonathan Kozol: 1967)[6]. Without this challenge and with the teacher's low expectation of the child, he never learns and is left with the feeling that he cannot learn.

The migrant child who experiences the frustration of being unable to learn because of his inability to understand the language often will never return to school because he never wants to again endure this humiliating process. On the other hand, the migrant child who is handled in the manner that has been suggested will often find learning to be an

exhilarating and fruitful experience. This will add another important dynamic, and that is a feeling that someone cares and is concerned about his receiving an opportunity to learn, which will in turn tend to engender a desire to learn.

NOTES

1. Many of the migrant life experiences described in this article are my own personal experiences. As a former migrant worker, I can personally attest to the subhuman conditions in all facets of life which the migrant workers are forced to endure.

2. Chicano - An individual who can trace his heritage to Mexico

3. Carnelismo - A slang term used in the barrio which denotes brotherhood

4. Joseph Spielberg points out that the Compadrazgo encompasses not only friendship, courtesy and respect, but also an actual moral obligation to provide mutual aid and support.

5. Philip Ortego suggests that Chicanos tend to do poorly on standard I.Q. tests because they do not have a full understanding of the language (English) nor do they understand the alien cultural orientation of the test which is drawn from the milieu of the middle-class Anglo-American.

6. Jonathan Kozol reflects upon the idea that when teachers react toward their students in a manner that demonstrates their belief that the student cannot learn, the student will usually fail to achieve. See Pages 1-8 and 149-157, Death At An Early Age, N.Y., Bantam Books, Inc. 1967.

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