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ABSTRACT

As a result of their mobile lifestyle, migrant children experience a high degree of unpredictability in all aspects of their lives. This paper illustrates how the patterns of migrant families' moves put their children at even greater risk for educational problems than is true for other mobile student groups, such as dependents of U.S. military personnel. Migrant families tend to move more frequently and in more erratic patterns than military families. Other characteristics of migrant families and their lifestyle are identified that, when combined with mobility, make migrant children's needs unique, and more dire, than those of other marginalized student subgroups. These characteristics are (1) poverty, underemployment, low income, and child labor; (2) social and geographic isolation; (3) language and cultural barriers that impede migrant families' communication with schools and community service providers; (4) low level of parental education, which lessens parents' involvement in their children's education; (5) limited access to federal assistance; (6) illegal immigration status, which limits access to services; (7) lack of protection with regard to occupational safety and health, labor disputes, and child labor; and (8) poor health status of migrant children, including higher rates of work-related injuries, acute conditions, and infectious diseases. (Contains 45 references.) (SV)

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Life on the Move:
The Unique Needs of Migratory Children

I. Introduction

As a result of their mobile lifestyle, migrant children experience a high degree of unpredictability in all aspects of their lives. The academic, social and emotional consequences of their mobility, when combined with the cultural barriers that a majority of them must face as children of recent immigrants, make the needs of migratory students even more critical than those of other disadvantaged populations. Indeed, of all subgroups of children in the United States, migrant students are the most undereducated, impoverished, and least likely to graduate from high school (Gouwens 2001). By not responding to the unique challenges faced by migratory students, public school systems may be inadvertently denying them of their basic right to the type of quality education that is crucial for their future success (Kindler 1995).

This paper illustrates how the frequency and irregular patterns of migrant families' moves put their children at an even greater risk for educational problems than other mobile student groups, such as the dependents of U.S. military personnel. Nine other characteristics of the migrant lifestyle will then be identified that, when combined with mobility, make migrant children's needs unique, and indeed more dire, than those of other marginalized student subgroups. It is not mobility alone, but mobility compounded by a number of other factors, including, but not limited to, poverty, social and geographic

isolation, language and cultural barriers and poor health and nutrition that negatively impacts the educational attainment of migrant children (Leon 1996).

II. Mobility

The most common identifying characteristic of migratory workers is that they are, as defined under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as individuals who, in the preceding 36 months have moved, either alone or accompanied by their spouses and dependents, across district lines in order to obtain temporary or seasonal work in agriculture, fishing, or other related industries.[1] Though other conflicting definitions of "migratory workers" exist, and the mobile nature of their lifestyle makes them difficult to count, the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS), which is based on representative sampling and bilingual and bicultural interviews, provides the most comprehensive demographic information available on hired farm workers (Acosta and Lee 2001; Davis and Leonard 2000). For the purposes of the NAWS survey, migrant farmworkers are a subset of hired farmworkers. According to the most recent NAWS data available:

- 81 percent of hired farmworkers are foreign born, with 77 percent of Mexican origin.
- 84 percent of hired farmworkers speak Spanish.
- Half of all individual hired farmworkers earn less than $ 7,500 per year, while half of all farmworker families earn less than $10,000 per year.
- 52 percent of farm workers lack work authorization.
- 38 percent have only four to seven years of schooling
- 56 percent of these workers have traveled more than 75 miles to find work.[2]

[1] Title I, Part C, section 1309 (2) of PL 107-110.

[2] Unlike the Current Population Survey (CPS), which includes self-employed, unpaid, and hired farmworkers, NAWS focuses exclusively on hired workers who are engaged in crop agriculture (excluding livestock workers). The NAWS sample includes: farmworkers, field packers, supervisors and those who hold both farm and nonfarm jobs simultaneously. It excludes, however, H-2A temporary foreign agricultural workers and unemployed farmworkers (Davis and Leonard 2000); (NAWS 2000).

While each of these statistics will be individually addressed in subsequent sections of this paper, when taken as a whole, they provide a profile of the typical hired farmworker employed in U.S. agriculture. If the NAWS percentage is correct, then, at the time of the survey, there were approximately 694,000 migrant farmworkers in the U.S (NAWS 2000).

Although there are several types of migration (including intrastate migration) and recent changes in the industry have eroded the traditional patterns somewhat, the majority of migrant workers still tend to follow either the Eastern, Mid-Continent, or West Coast migration streams.[3] Whether the home base of these circular migrants is in Mexico, as it is for approximately one-third of all migrant farmworkers, or in the United States, it tends to be rural, agriculturally dominated and economically disadvantaged (Rothenberg 1998). For example, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, a home base for many migrants in the Mid-Continent Stream, the average poverty rate is 52 percent and the unemployment rate hovers around 30 percent (USDA Rural Empowerment Zone website 2002). Most migrant families leave their home base states in late spring or early summer and do not return again until the following November. The fact that the agricultural season crosscuts the school year makes regular attendance, learning at grade level, accruing credits, passing state assessments, and meeting graduation requirements extremely difficult for migrant children (Cox 1992).

[3] The Eastern Stream is composed of Puerto Ricans, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, Anglos and Canadian Indians who travel the region east of the Appalachian Mountains. The Mid-Continent Stream, which is composed of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Blacks, Vietnamese and Cambodians, moves to and from Texas along the Mississippi River basin. Finally, the West Coast Stream, a stream in which documented and undocumented Mexicans, Central Americans, Vietnamese, Filipinos and other Western Pacific immigrants predominate, travel from California or Arizona to Oregon and Washington (Prewitt, et al 1989); (U.S. GAO 1999).

Since the primary push for migration is economic, anything that might interfere with work-obtaining health care, educating one's children, dealing with social problems-often becomes, out of necessity, a secondary concern (Prewitt et al 1989). For migrant agricultural workers, decisions concerning when and where to move, though often based upon kinship networks and the availability of housing and schools for their children, are even more dependent on the lengths of crop seasons, the current rates of pay, the weather and the broad condition of the economy.[4] Since each of these factors can vary significantly from year to year, it is not surprising that in a single school year, students from one Texas school district attended schools in at least forty other states before returning home (U.S. GAO 1999). Traditional migration patterns and what limited job security once existed in seasonal farm work are eroding even further due to the mechanization of agricultural work, the growth of large-scale agribusiness, and the increasing numbers of transnational migrants who are willing to work for extremely low wages (U.S. GAO 1999).

- **Mobility and Education**

Recent research has identified student mobility, which is often correlated with low family income, as one of the greatest threats to both student academic achievement and the school environment (Biernat and Jax 2000; Paik and Phillips 2002; and Rumberger 2002). Fourty-one percent of highly mobile students are low achievers, compared with 26 percent of other students. Additionally, frequent movers are 35 percent more likely to

[4] For example, strawberries are one of the most profitable row crops in California, but they are also among the riskiest to cultivate. Strawberries attract a wide variety of pests, including aphids, eelworms, and red spider mites. Moreover, they depend upon cool nights and warm, sunny days, with no wind above five miles per hour and no rain once the berries have appeared. Strawberries are also highly perishable, spoiling within ten days of being picked. As a result of all of the factors, the wholesale prices for strawberries can fluctuate from $ 4.00 to $ 22.00 a box. In bad years, growers are often tempted to cut labor costs by employing undocumented workers to pick strawberries in cash, thereby lowering the costs of that worker by at least 20 percent (Schlosser 1995).

repeat a grade than their non-mobile peers (Paik and Phillips 2002). Though troubling, the most startling statistics link frequent moves during elementary school with high dropout rates and cumulative academic lags of up to one year. Children who change schools more than three times before eighth grade are at least four times more likely to drop out of school than other students who remain at a single school (U.S. GAO 1994). Students who move more than three times in six years can fall one full year behind stable students (Kerbow 1996).

Ann Cranston-Gingras, director of the Center for the Study of Migrant Education at the University of South Florida, identified mobility-induced educational discontinuity as the single greatest challenge to migratory students (Education World website 2002). Studies and survey data have supported that assertion. For example, one study found that the average number of school changes for migrant students who dropped out was 17.5 versus 10.3 for those who graduated (Martinez et al 1994). Another survey, though rather dated, reported that 83 percent of migrant students sampled identified frequent moves as a major obstacle to their education (Nelkin and Gallo 1976).

- **Migrant Families vs. Military Families**

This close correlation between new findings, which are focused on the increasing numbers of mobile students in the general population, and existing research on migrant families begs to question what it is about the mobile lifestyle of migrant farmworkers that differs from other mobile groups, such as military families. Migrant families tend to move more frequently and in more erratic patterns than military families. In 1999, the average time between PCS (permanent change of status) moves for members of the U.S. military was two years, with those who were married and had dependents having the

longest tour lengths (U.S. GAO 2001). The length of tours for military families is increasing as a result of research linking longer times between moves to higher job satisfaction and retention. In addition to enjoying longer stays in each place of residence, these families move between bases and/or communities that are accustomed to providing schools, housing and other supportive services to military personnel and their dependents. In contrast, migrant families often enter the fringes of predominantly White communities in which they are geographically, linguistically and culturally cut off from mainstream U.S. society.

Paik and Phillips (2002) assert that mobility is especially challenging for students, families and schools to adapt to when it is combined with "other contributing factors." In the case of migrant families, educators have identified some of these factors as economic marginality, social and geographic isolation, limited English-language proficiency, poor health and nutrition, and lack of self-esteem (Leon 1996). The remainder of this paper will identify nine characteristics of the migrant lifestyle that, when combined with mobility, make migrant children's' needs unique from those of other disadvantaged students.

III. Poverty

Migrant farmworkers are among the lowest paid workers in the U.S. economy. Laborers paid by the hour rarely earn more than the federal minimum wage ($5.15 per hour); while those who earn a piece rate rarely receive more than $7.00 per hour (Human Rights Watch 2000). Additionally, the average number of weeks worked by migrant farmworkers has declined from 26.2 weeks in 1990-92, to 24.4 weeks in 1996-8 (NAWS 2000). In both July 1997 and 1998, months when farm labor was at its peak, only 56

percent of the available migrant labor force was employed (NAWS 2000). In addition to low wages and chronic underemployment, growers are not required to pay overtime wages and so farm laborers cannot earn extra profit by working longer hours during the harvest season. As a result of all of these factors, estimates of the annual earnings of individual farmworkers range from just $5,000 to $7,740 per year (NASS 2000; Rothenberg 1998). For two earner farmworker families, Human Rights Watch reported that the average annual income in 1999 was just over $14,000 per year, well below the federal poverty level of $16,700 (HR Watch 2000). This estimate corroborates the NAWS data previously cited from 1993-8, which found that half of all farmworker families earn less than $10,000 per year (NAWS 2000).

If farmworkers were paid a living wage, then their children would be under less pressure to begin working in the fields. The estimated percentages of migrant families whose children work in the fields range from 6 percent (NAWS 2000) to 40 percent (Rothenberg 1998).[5] Similarly, estimates of the number of youth working in U.S. agriculture each year, although not specifically limited to the number of migrant teens working in agriculture, range from 126,000 to 300,000.[6] While the increasing costs of migration from Mexico, a declining reliance on family crews, and the increasing availability of summer programs for migrant youth have caused the overall number of youth employed in U.S. agriculture to decline in recent years, some 30-40,000

[5] Since 83 percent of the children in the NAWS data set were under the age of 14 and the vast majority of migrant children who work are age 14-17, it likely underestimates the percentage of children in farmworker families who work.

[6] NAWS estimates that the number of children working from FY 1993-8 averaged 126,000 (NAWS 2000). Meanwhile, Aguirre International uses the same data to estimate that the annual average was actually 156,000 (Kissam 2001). Davis and Leonard averaged the monthly CPS surveys over an entire year to find an estimate of 155,000 15-17 year olds employed in U.S. agriculture (Davis and Leonard 2000). Finally, although its data source and methodology are not explicitly stated, Human Rights Watch quotes the GAO figure of 300,000 (Human Rights Watch 2000; "Child Labor in Agriculture: Characteristics and Legality of Work," Washington, DC: U.S. GAO, 1998; GAO/HEHS-98-112R).

transnational migrants, many of whom are emancipated minors with falsified documents, arrive annually to work in the fields (Kissam 2001). Due to the lack of legal protection for youth employed in agriculture, migrant youths from extremely poor families often risk their health and forego their education for substandard wages earned in dangerous working conditions (Acosta et al 2001).

Even if migrant youth do not contribute directly to the household income by working in the fields, children as young as ten years old often make significant, albeit indirect, monetary contributions by providing child care for younger children (Prewitt et al 1989). Martinez, Gingras and Platt also discovered that a significant proportion of the students whom they interviewed missed school frequently for reasons other than illness, such as having "to assist parents in translating or otherwise negotiating the system" (Martinez et al 1994). Due to the extreme poverty of their parents, migrant children are often forced to grow up quickly and to adopt adult roles as either care givers (girls) or wage earners (boys) much sooner than other children (Lopez 1999).

IV. Social Isolation

Social and geographic isolation can exaggerate the effects of continual movement and extreme poverty on migrant farmworker families. In his book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson argues that the negative statistics that exist to document the *social dislocation* of African-Americans and other ethnic minorities, such as high crime, dropout and unemployment rates, often occur as a result of the *social isolation* existing between those minorities and the rest of White, middle-class society. Social isolation, according to Wilson, occurs when there is a disproportionate concentration of low-income people living in one geographic area without access to

quality education or jobs prospects, or frequent contacts with members of other social classes (Wilson 1987).

The geographic distance between migrant camps and urban centers reinforces feelings of being isolated from the rest of the community. Survey results have shown that, due to their extreme poverty and limited access to transportation, the most convenient living situation for migrant families is still employer-provided housing located close to the fields in which they work. In fact, regardless of the living conditions available, workers would rather live in unsanitary camps than have no housing at all or have to pay exorbitant rents in urban areas (HAC 1997). As a result, the farther away migrant families live from the points of contact with the rest of the community-such as parks, restaurants or shopping areas-the fewer interactions they tend to have with mainstream U.S. culture.

Although it is difficult to measure a subjective concept such as social isolation, recent ethnographic accounts of the migratory lifestyle tend to reinforce Wilson's prediction that other ethnic minorities, specifically Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, would fall into a pattern of social dislocation similar to that already experienced by African-Americans. Prewitt et al (1989) describe this phenomenon as the "invisibility" of migrant farmworkers, whereas Rothenberg (1998) notes that, owing to their status as dislocated outsiders in the communities in which they reside, farmworkers must rely upon intermediaries and informal networks, rather than traditional job and fraternal networks, in order to survive. While not specifically addressed by Rothenberg, one of the other root causes of this social isolation appears to be caused by the prejudices toward

migrant farmworkers present in some receiving communities. In, *When Discourses Collide*, Marianne Exum Lopez (1999) interviews one migrant father who angrily states:

> (They) just think we're servants. They don't think we have a life for anything but picking their fruit...they don't think we care about our families. They don't think we have needs the same as them. They don't see us as equals.

Finally, for Latino migrant farmworkers, many of whom are of Mexican origin, feelings of frustration and isolation are further magnified by physical separation from extended family and friends, who would traditionally have provided a strong support network for them and their children.

V. Language and Cultural Barriers

As good communication is vital to the success of any family, so too is it essential that parents are able to communicate their children's needs to schools, health providers and social service agencies. For migrant farmworkers, 77 percent of whom are foreign born, 84 percent of whom speak little or no English, and 90 percent of whom speak a language other than English in the home; this can be a particularly daunting task (NAWS 2000). The degree of language and cultural barriers that a migrant family must confront depends on the level of parental education and acculturation and the infrastructure (or lack thereof) in place to serve migrants in the communities in which they reside. New arrivals to a community that is unaccustomed to serving the needs of migrant populations will encounter far more barriers than those who regularly migrate to the same receiving community in which a large number of other migrants reside.

Despite these caveats, there are some arenas in which cultural and linguistic barriers tend to manifest themselves for a majority of migrant families. For example, despite its proven effectiveness, political efforts to eliminate bilingual education

programs and a dearth of qualified bilingual teachers have hurt the majority of migrant children who are limited English proficient (Rodriguez 1999; Romo 1999). A recent New York Times article reports that there are only 50,000 qualified bilingual education teachers, or one for every 100 students with limited English skills. In order to serve these students in classes of the average national size - 17 students per teacher - 290,000 such teachers would be necessary (New York Times 8/5/2002).

VI. Parents and Education

On average, adult migrant farmworkers have only 5 years of formal education (Bartlett, cited by HR Watch 2000). Indeed, for adult migrants of Mexican-origin, who represent the vast majority all foreign born migrants, formal education, though based on a more rigorous primary school curriculum than that used by many U.S. schools, ended prematurely so that they could work or care for younger siblings. As a result, fewer than 25 percent of Mexican immigrants and 46 percent of Central Americans have the equivalent of a high school diploma or GED, as compared to 77 percent of all U.S.-born adults (Romo 1999). This lack of a formal education, especially when combined with limited English proficiency, makes many migrant parents unable (or at least reluctant) to help their children with homework, to attend parent conferences, or to advocate for their children.

Research has shown that involving parents in their children's education results in positive academic outcomes (Cassanova 19996; Chavkin 1993). Since parental involvement in the United States is narrowly defined as preparing children for school, attending school events, and responding to teacher requests, marginalized families tend to be labeled as "uninvolved" parents (López 2001; Martinez and Velazquez 2000).

Whereas middle class parents may have the time, education, transportation and resources available to perform the aforementioned tasks, migrant families often do not. Although migrant parents consistently identify education as a way out of the migrant lifestyle, many have been brought up to believe that parents should defer to the authority of teachers and school personnel (Bressler 1997; Lopez 1999; Prewitt et al 1989). Additionally, parents say that it is difficult for them to adjust to the "Americanization" of their children, who bring ideas into their homes that conflict with Mexican religious values and traditional gender roles (Lopez 1999). Finally, if a broader definition of parental involvement is used, then it becomes clear that through the medium of hard work, migrant parents do set high standards for their children and instill them with a work ethic in the fields that can be harnessed in the classroom (López 2001).

VII. Access to Federal Assistance

Migrant families are less likely than other disadvantaged families to receive Medicaid, food stamps, or welfare benefits. While some families lack proper documentation and are therefore ineligible for federal assistance, many others, though eligible, are often either unaware of, or unable to communicate their needs in English to traditional social service providers. Moreover, migrant families' emphasis on hard work and self-sufficiency may make them more reluctant to turn to charity for support than other impoverished groups. Reinforcing these linguistic and cultural barriers to access are the long hours they work, the geographic isolation of the camps and/or rental units they tend to inhabit and their lack of transportation. Of the 94 percent of farmworker families surveyed in which children did not work, 64 percent of the families lived in extreme poverty, but only 33 percent received food stamps, 32 percent received

assistance from the Women, Infants, and Children program and 11 percent participated in TANF (U.S. Department of Labor 2000, citing NAWS 2000).

VIII. Immigration Status

Every year, between 1.5 and 2.5 million people enter the U.S. illegally, primarily by crossing the U.S.- Mexico border (Rothenberg 1998). As of mid-2001, using middle range estimates from a recent report, there were 7.8 million undocumented workers in the United States, with 4.5 million of those workers of Mexican origin (Bean et al 2001). The informality inherent in seasonal agriculture attracts many unauthorized workers to the migrant lifestyle. According to the NAWS data, 52 percent of hired farmworkers are unauthorized to work in this country, a percentage that has increased by 1 percent since the early 1990s (NAWS 2000). This phenomenon has increased as growers have reduced their labor costs, which can constitute 50 to 70 percent of their total production costs, by paying unauthorized "invisible workers" in cash to avoid paying Social Security, Medicare, and worker's compensation payments (Schlosser 1995).

Families that have entered this country without work permits or proper documentation live in constant fear of deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Many of these families are also saddled with debts that they must pay off at exorbitant interest rates to the "coyotes"[7] that brought them across the border. Since they lack proper documentation, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and other legislation protecting the health and well-being of agricultural workers do not apply to them. Finally, despite the 1982 Supreme Court ruling in *Plyer v. Doe*, which guarantees a free public education to all undocumented children, recent efforts to subvert that

[7] "Coyotes" or "polleros" are colloquial terms for the smugglers that help undocumented immigrants cross the U.S./Mexico border.

legislation, such as Proposition 187 in California, have made many school districts suspicious, if not downright hostile, to families without proper documentation (Midobuche 2001). Families in which the parents lack documents, but the children were born in the United States, fair far better than those in which no family members have proper documentation. In these families, children can qualify for programs, like state-sponsored health insurance (SCHIP) and federal financial aid.

IX. Legal Issues

As stated in the previous section, the 52 percent of adult farmworkers who are not authorized to work in the U.S. are not protected by U.S. labor legislation (NAWS 2000). Even those that are protected by FLSA and other federal laws, especially migrant youth who work in the fields, often have to cope with hazardous or unsanitary conditions due to the inadequacy of current legislation. For instance, federal law exempts farms from paying overtime wages even though farmworkers have to work 10-12 hours a day at the height of the harvest season. Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires all farms to supply their workers with drinking water, water for hand washing and toilet facilities, a small farm exemption allows as many as 95 percent of U.S. farms to avoid complying with these requirements (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 1998). Finally, growers increasingly maintain that the farm labor contractors whom they use as middlemen to hire workers and get them to the fields each day are the only employers of those farmworkers. Growers thus evade responsibility in the event of wage disputes, health and safety violations, or other unfair or illegal practices.

The most startling example of the inadequacy of existing labor legislation is in the area of child labor. The FLSA outlawed child labor in most industries in 1938, but did not put age limits on agricultural labor until 1974. In most industries, youth must be at least 16 before they can be employed full-time and they must be at least 18 before they can work in hazardous occupations. Youths 14 and 15 years of age can only work limited hours, outside of school hours (FLSA, 29, U.S.C. Section 203[1]). In agriculture, a 14 year old can work unlimited hours and a 16 year old can perform hazardous jobs, such as operating heavy equipment or handling pesticides (FLSA 29, U.S.C. Section 213[a][6]). While the Department of Labor cited only 104 cases of child labor violations in FY 1998, estimates are that there are up to one million such violations annually. (HR Watch 2000). Two unfortunate results of the insufficiency of the FLSA and the poor enforcement of its provisions is that some 24,000 children are injured and 300 die annually as a result of work-related incidents on U.S. farms (Rothenberg 1998). Additionally, children working in agriculture account for only 8 percent of the population of working minors, yet account for 40 percent of work-related fatalities among children (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 1998).

X. Health Status

Migrant children are not only prone to suffering work-related injuries or farm accidents; they are also more vulnerable to acute conditions and infectious diseases than non-migrant children. One study found that, 34 percent of migrant children are infected with intestinal parasites, severe asthma, chronic diarrhea, vitamin deficiencies, chemical poisoning, or cyclical bouts of otitis media leading to hearing loss (Migrant Health Program, citing Otarola 1996). Furthermore, the EPA estimates that some 300,000

farmworkers suffer pesticide poisoning each year (GAO 1992). Children and infants, who live, work, and play in or near fields that have recently been sprayed are more vulnerable to the toxic effects of pesticides than adult farmworkers as a result of their lower weights and higher metabolisms (National Resources Defense Council 1998).

The combined effects of the mobile lifestyle, poverty and substandard working and living conditions place migrant children at-risk for developing a variety of serious health conditions. It is particularly troubling, then, that only 10 percent of farmworker families report having employer-provided health insurance (U.S. Department of Labor 2000). To remedy this problem, the federal Migrant Health Program, created in 1962 by Public Health Law 87-692, provides grants to more than 125 public and nonprofit organizations that operate some 400 clinics serving migrant families in the U.S. and Puerto Rico (Migrant Health Program 2002). Due to funding limitations, however, these clinics serve less than 15 percent of the nation's migrant and seasonal farmworkers (National Advisory Council of Migrant Health 1993).

XI. Conclusion

The deleterious effects of student mobility on academic achievement have been well documented (Biernat and Jax 2000; Paik and Phillips 2002; and Rumberger 2002). For the children of migrant farmworkers, frequent moving is a part of life.

This paper has identified nine characteristics, in addition to mobility, which are pervasive in the lives of migrant families. These characteristics, which fall into the subgroups of poverty, social isolation, language and cultural barriers, legal issues, and health status, compound the effects of mobility on migrant children. To the extent that additional

characteristics are present in a particular family's life, children within that family will be more likely to encounter greater obstacles to their educational success.

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