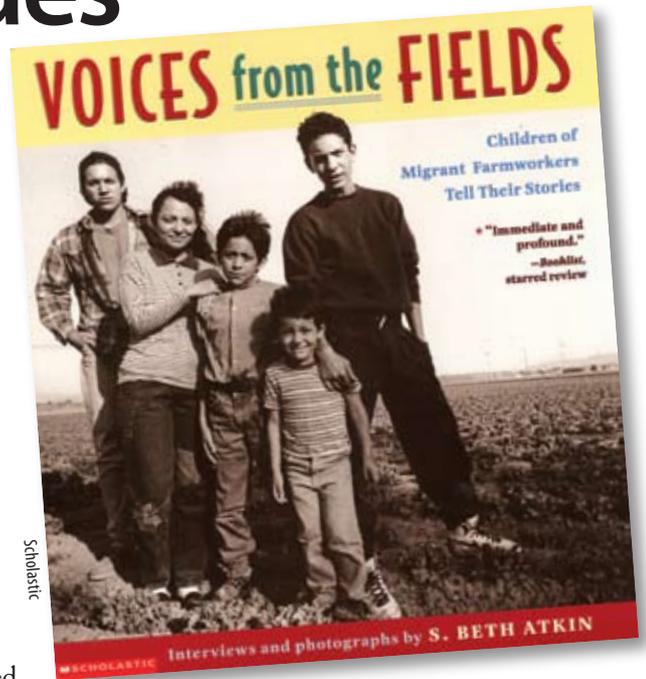


Children of Migrant Workers: Exploring the Issues

Lynne Bercaw, Susan Colby,
Linda Pacifici, Sandra Oldendorf,
Robin Groce, and Eric Groce

After a long, hard, and hot day in the field,
under the implacable rays of the Father of Life,
my muscles ache and my bones hurt and crack
as though they were crystals breaking.
I'm dirty, thirsty, and hungry.
My body is so tired and sore
that I fear it might crumble
like an old building being torn down.

Ortiz, in S. B. Atkin, ed., VOICES FROM THE FIELDS.



The topic of migrant workers is commonplace among headlines in the national news, but such workers have been part of the United States economy for at least seventy-five years, as can be seen in decades of enrollment records in K-12 schools.¹ Migrant students have been, until recent years, a concern for schools closest to the US-Mexican border, but children of migrant workers are now part of the social fabric across the country—there are almost one million in our schools today.²

Teachers can help their students, both migrant and non-migrant, understand the experiences of this ever-growing population, and thus aid in dismantling stereotypes and building a stronger democratic citizenry.

First, we must define a few terms.³ For the purposes of classroom discussion, we define an “immigrant” as any person who has come to the United States from another country. (Depending on where the speaker stands on the controversial issue of immigration, one who enters the United States without permission from the federal government could be called

either an “undocumented worker” or an “illegal alien.”)

We define a “migrant worker” as a person who moves (within a country or across borders) in order to find employment. Often, migrant workers follow seasonal jobs, like harvesting crops. Many migrant workers in the United States today are immigrants from Mexico.

The first wave of immigration from Mexico began with the Mexican Revolution from 1910-1930. The harsh economic conditions and severe political unrest at that time left all but the wealthiest Mexicans desperate for a new life.

Initially, many of these Mexican immigrants took jobs working for the railroad, in mining camps, and on farms, especially in the Southwestern United States. The Great Depression and drought left many Americans homeless, both immigrants and U.S.-born citizens, forcing them to migrate from place to place, seeking work in the fields harvesting crops.

During World War II, demands for factory laborers along with a rapidly growing U.S. agricultural industry fueled

the emigration of one million Mexican workers and their families across the border. Today, immigrants (legal and undocumented) from Mexico number about 20 million.⁴

Challenge and Change

The opening quote hints at the physical hardships that migrant workers commonly endured. The language barrier; segregation in housing and education; lower wages; extremely difficult physical labor; and other prejudicial hardships conflicted with the dream of a new and more prosperous life. Each wave of immigrants across the decades has confronted the challenge of acculturation: learning about the culture, language, values, and traditions of the majority. At the same time, immigrants introduce elements of their culture of origin to their new community.

Mexican immigrants began organizing to obtain the same opportunities as mainstream Americans (for education, voting rights, and employment) in 1929, when The League of United

Latin American Citizens was founded in Texas. Since then, many organizations have worked to improve the process of integration into mainstream American society and influence public policy. Prominent figures and organizations include: Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, the Chicano Movement, the Mexican American Youth Organization, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the National Council of La Raza.

The growing number of Mexicans entering the United States as undocumented workers is an increasingly controversial issue.

Current Issues

With this increasing immigrant population, issues arise from conflicting political, religious, economic, and ideological points of view. U.S. legislation has, over the years, alternately helped or hindered opportunities for immigrants to work and become citizens. For example, in 1986 the Immigration Reform and Control Act, also known as the Amnesty Act, provided opportunities for some illegal immigrants to become permanent legal residents, while also limiting the numbers of new immigrants coming into the United States. In the 1990s the U.S. government instituted Operation Hold the Line and Operation Gatekeeper, among other programs, to slow the influx of immigrants and tighten border security. The policy controversies surrounding the lives of the migrant workers and their families continue today.

An Integrated Unit of Study

This unit of study integrates language arts and social studies for the fifth grade classroom. It explores the issues faced by children of migrant workers through various literature, both fiction and non-fiction, historical and contemporary.

History is about significant issues and questions that involve people, their cultures, and their choices in the past and in the present. Using literature to talk about the past and social-cultural issues moves social studies from the study of dates, names and places to something

that is alive and relevant to children and their world. For example, stereotypes can be deconstructed when students are immersed in personal stories and facts that accurately portray a specific culture.

This unit aligns with the curricular thematic strand **I CULTURE; II TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; and III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS.**⁵ In addition, this unit is aligned with goals outlined in many state curricula. For instance, in North Carolina, it aligns with fifth grade social studies curriculum goals:

- The learner will apply key geographic concepts to the United States and other countries of North America.
- The learner will analyze political and social institutions in North America and examine how these institutions respond to human needs, structure society, and influence behavior.
- The learner will examine the roles various ethnic groups have played in the development of the United States and its neighboring countries.
- The learner will trace key developments in United States history and describe their impact on the land and people of the nation and its neighboring countries.⁶

Core Literature

We chose relevant, quality literature that was appropriate to the theme and level of reading difficulty. We used a variety of sources in selecting books.⁷

For this unit, we chose *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan as the primary text. This novel chronicles the life of Esperanza, a young girl whose father is an affluent rancher in Mexico. In a tragic series of events, Esperanza's family loses everything, and she and her mother migrate to the United States in hopes of escaping dire poverty. Here, Esperanza experiences the harsh circumstances of migrant workers as they follow the harvest. During her personal journey of self-understanding, she transforms from a comfortable rancher's daughter to a strong independent woman.

There are several other novels that can be used for literature circles. *The Circuit* is an autobiographical account of a migrant family as they move from one labor camp to another harvesting crops. Francisco Jimenez, the author, describes his experiences as a member of a migrant worker family and his struggles to assimilate into school. In *Spirits of the High Mesa*, the reader learns of Flavio and his attempts to balance his native home life with the modern world. *My Name is Maria Isabel* is an account of a young girl whose classroom teacher naively tries to change her student's name to "Mary."

Picture Books

Picture books can be used to further students' understanding of the people, places, and issues in the unit. In *Harvesting Hope*, the reader follows the life story of Cesar Chavez, learning of his commitment to raise the quality of life for the migrant worker. In *Going Home*, Carlos and his family return to their native Mexico for Christmas. The reader follows the family as the generational differences unfold during the course of the trip.

Nonfiction

Nonfiction resources provide background information for this unit. These



resources provide factual information and authentic perspectives to the lessons. Nonfiction books for this unit include two compilations of autobiographical accounts and two nonfiction texts. *Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farmworkers Tell Their Story* and *We are Americans: Voices of the Immigrant Experience* offer an insider's view of the immigrant experience. *The Mexican Americans* and *The Mexicans* provide juvenile readers with the historical and contemporary context for this unit, covering a variety of topics in a child-friendly format. *The Mexicans*, a book for more advanced readers, is a series of edited pieces on topics such as the American Southwest as a cultural extension of Mexico; immigration and assimilation; struggles and successes; and profiles of Mexican Americans. Several informative websites can also be used in this unit.⁸

Whole-group Reading

To begin the unit, *Esperanza Rising* is read and discussed with the guidance of the teacher. The teacher can choose to read this novel aloud, have students read the book in pairs, or assign sections for independent reading, providing support for various reading abilities. Generally, reading this novel as a class takes between 5-10 days. As students read and respond to *Esperanza Rising*, teachers can focus on comprehension, comparing and contrasting, detecting cause and effect, and other English/language arts objectives. From a social studies perspective, *Esperanza Rising* provides a foundation for exploring the issues faced by the children of migrant workers and their families. The following questions and suggestions might guide discussion and further study before, during, and after reading.

- Read the following quote from *The Circuit*. Using this excerpt and others you have found in *Esperanza Rising*, describe the living conditions in migrant camps⁹:

We called it Tent City. Everybody called it Tent City, although it was

neither a city nor a town. It was a farm worker labor camp owned by Sheehy Strawberry Farms. Tent City had no address; it was simply known as rural Santa Maria. It was on Main Street, about ten miles east of the center of town. A half a mile east of it were hundreds of acres of strawberries cultivated by Japanese sharecroppers and harvested by people from the camp. Behind Tent City was dry wilderness and a mile north of it was the city dump. Many of the residents in the camp were single men, most of whom, like us, had crossed the border illegally. There were a few single women and a few families, all Mexican.

- What are the working conditions for migrant workers? Use excerpts from the book you are reading to provide evidence for your description.
- How do these conditions compare to the conditions experienced by other American families?
- What are the problems that migrant workers and their children face?
- Using samples of news headlines provided by the teacher, list some of the key issues involved in the debate regarding undocumented immigrants and migrant workers.
- What are the views of Americans towards migrant workers? Toward undocumented workers? Are these perceptions based on stereotypes? Critique these views based on your knowledge of our current situation. Use a variety of resources (websites, news articles, etc.) to support your critique.

One value that is held in high esteem by many Mexican farm workers is loyalty to the family. Family members are expected to help each other, to sacrifice for the good of the entire family, even when the cost to the individual is great.¹⁰ For example, the main source of income for many poor families in rural Mexico is the wage of a relative working in the United States. With this point in mind, students can try responding to the fol-

lowing questions:

- What are the challenges that a child of a migrant worker encounters given this family value?
- How has this value changed across generations?
- What will this value mean for a new generation of sons and daughters educated in America?
- Compare and contrast this family value with your family values.

Literature Circles

After reading *Esperanza Rising* as a whole class, form literature circles based on students' interests and abilities using one or more of the novels and informational texts described above. Literature circles allow a small group of students to discuss a piece of literature in depth. Students become critical thinkers as they engage in an ongoing dialogue about the book. For this strategy, teachers often provide prompts to spark discussion. Information on how to conduct literature circles as well as models, prompts, and printable copies of "role sheets" are readily available.¹¹

By reading and discussing these novels and texts in the literature circle, students are able to more intimately construct a rich understanding of the issues facing the children of migrant workers. In addition, the teacher has an opportunity to expand upon prompts with in-depth discussion.

The first day of the literature circle begins with the teacher establishing the broad historical context in which the novel takes place. Prompts used in the literature circles could be used with any selected novel and informational text. For example, after students read the first section of their novel and the appropriate sections of their informational texts, they could respond to the following prompts:

- What is the historical context of the book you are reading? Describe how you know this using information/text from the book.
- Read the nonfiction book that accompanies your historical fiction selection. Write down a few facts or ideas that you learned from your reading

that you would like to discuss with your group. Explain how these insights further your understanding of the novel you are reading.

Additionally, each day students respond to the following prompts. Their written responses can be used later in the unit to create two timelines:

- Record the important historical events that you learned about from your nonfiction selection.
- Record the important historical events that you learned about from your novel.

On the second day, students make connections with their personal lives and the lives of the characters portrayed in the novel. This is an opportunity for students from various backgrounds and experiences to contribute to the discussion. Numerous personal accounts may be gathered from the informational texts, or teachers may wish to use (after a careful reading) websites where children of migrant workers have written their stories.¹²

Students respond to the following prompts:

- What personal connections did you make with your book so far? Did it make you think of anything happening in the news, around school, or in your life? If so, describe the event.
- Describe challenges your main character is facing in your book. What types of support did he/she have?
- Go online and explore one website discussed in class. Look for interesting information, ideas, and/or compelling contributions. Share this information with your group. Be sure to note your sources.

On the third day, students select specific passages that are meaningful, surprising, or even troubling. Students respond to the following prompts:

- Write a summary of your reading selection.
- Select three favorite passages from

your reading and record the page number. Describe why you selected each passage.

Response activities in the fourth and fifth days are based on revisiting the questions discussed for the novel *Esperanza Rising*. The teacher may ask each literature circle group to focus on a different set of questions or may select the same questions for the entire class.

For example, a teacher wishing to continue exploring stereotypes may ask students to respond to the following prompt, which applies to *Esperanza Rising*:

- What are the views of Americans towards migrant workers?

When discussing these views, the teacher can mention the wide range of public opinions on these matters today.

During the fourth and fifth days, ask students to create one timeline based on the important events in their novel, and a second timeline (covering the same years) based on the historical events outlined in their nonfiction sources. Creating timelines in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades is useful in showing trends in human experience, causes and effects, and eras and their characteristics. Ask students from each literature circle group to discuss their novel and what they have learned, and to share their timelines with the class.

A,B,C in Spanish

There are two culminating activities that could be used with this unit: a bilingual ABC book, which emphasizes language arts skills, and a “suitcase geography” presentation, which emphasizes social studies skills.

For the first activity, students create a bilingual ABC book based on the core reading. Their finished book will feature Spanish words in alphabetical order.

Ask students to review the core novel and select one or more key words for each chapter. A key word would remind the reader of important events or experiences in that chapter. Then they can use English/Spanish dictionaries to translate each word into Spanish.

After translating twenty words or so,

it will become clear to the students that some letters of the alphabet have not been used (probably X, Y, Z, and a few others). Challenge students to turn to the Spanish section of the dictionary and look for words that complete the missing parts of their ABC book. Can students creatively relate these new words to the book they have just read? Words from one group’s bilingual ABC book, based on *Esperanza Rising*, included

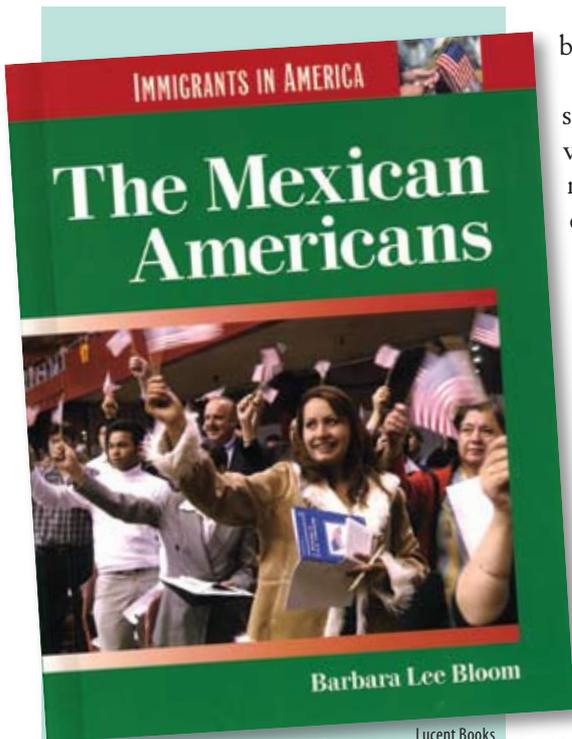
- E - *esperanza*, hope
- G - *gato pequeno*, kitten
- I - *immigracion*, immigration
- V - *viaje*, journey or voyage

The students’ finished ABC book should contain one letter per page, with both Spanish and English words. If there is time, students can draw an illustration for each word.

A Suitcase for Necessities

The culminating project for social studies is an adaptation of suitcase geography.¹³ To prepare for this activity, the teacher has assembled artifacts and other materials from a particular region, country, or city (from anywhere in the world) and placed them in a suitcase. These items may include books, musical instruments, plants, photos, and other artifacts from that place. The teacher asks the students to guess where he or she has visited and records their responses. Students examine each artifact, passing them around one at a time. The class then engages in discussion centered on questions such as: What do you think you are holding? Describe what you have. What do you think it is used for? Where do you think it is from and why? Is it like anything we have in our country or region?

Now invite students to turn to the situation of an emigrant leaving Mexico. What might one take if he or she were emigrating to the United States? The teacher may engage the students in a prioritizing activity, referring back to *Esperanza Rising*, at the point when the girl and her mother leave Mexico bringing only what they could carry. Students could discuss the value—functional, monetary, aesthetic, and personal—of



Lucent Books

Books for Students

Core Literature

- Ada, F. A. *My Name is Maria Isabel*. New York: Atheneum Books, 1993.
- Jimenez, F. *The Circuit*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.
- Ryan, P. M. *Esperanza Rising*. New York: Scholastic, 2000.
- Martinez, F. *Spirits of the High Mesa*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1997.

Picture Books

- Bunting, E. *Going Home*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.
- Krull, K. *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2003.

Nonfiction

- Atkin, S. B. *Voices from the Fields*. Boston, MA: Joy Street Books, 1993.
- Bloom, B. *The Mexican Americans*. San Diego, CA: Thomson-Gale, 2004.
- Hoobler, D. and Hoobler, T. *We are Americans: Voices of the Immigrant Experience*. New York: Scholastic, 2003.
- Powell, J. *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration*. New York, New York: Facts on File, 2005.
- Shane, C. J., ed. *The Mexicans*. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2005.

References for Teachers

- Hoone, C. J. "Teaching Timelines to Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Graders," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 2, no. 2 (1989): 13-15.
- Levstik, L. S. & Barton, K. C. *Doing History*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001.

bringing certain artifacts.

Having seen the teacher's model of suitcase geography, students in their various literature circle groups can now create their own collection, gathering items such as money, a favorite toy, seeds from a favorite flower, photos of family members staying behind, a favorite book, a musical instrument, and so forth. Students then engage their classmates in a discussion around these items, asking their peers questions similar to those the teacher has asked. This is an ideal opportunity for any children who emigrated from another country to talk about their experiences, if they wish.

Literature groups share the bilingual ABC books and the suitcase geography projects with the rest of the class during the last two days of the unit.

This unit celebration is a time for students to share what they have learned about children of migrant workers: their values, their way of life, and the issues they face while living in the United States.

Conclusion

Through the integration of children's literature with social studies content, students can begin to see the world through experiences outside of their own. The stories of both fictional characters and real people draw students into the lives of others. Teaching about the children of migrant workers using engaging stories based on real historical and contemporary events will help children make personal connections to the past, to other cultures, and to the world as it exists today. These experiences can help dispel stereotypical perceptions of children of migrant workers. 🌐

Notes

1. B. Bloom, *The Mexican Americans* (San Diego: Thomson-Gale, 2004).
2. Theresa Mendez, "Changing Schools with the Seasons," *The Christian Science Monitor* (February 15, 2005).
3. The Federation for American Immigration Reform has a useful glossary at www.fairus.org.
4. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2005*, www.uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/publications/ILL_PE_2005.pdf.
5. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
6. North Carolina content standards, www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum.
7. Sources include the National Council for the Social Studies' Notable Trade Books for Young People (www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable/).
8. League of United Latin American Citizens, www.lulac.org; National Council of La Raza, www.nclr.org, and The Human Rights of Migrant Workers, www.pdhre.org/rights/migrants.html.
9. F. Jimenez, *The Circuit* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 27.
10. S. B. Atkin, *Voices from the Fields* (Boston, MA: Joy Street Books, 1993).
11. www.allamericareads.org/lessonplan/strategies/during/litcirc1.htm and www.litcircles.org.
12. For example, Migrant Workers' Children at users.owt.com/rpeto/migrant/migrant.html
13. S. B. Oldendorf, "Suitcase Geography," *Tar Heel News* (Winter, 2005):12-13.

LYNNE BERCAW is an associate professor in the Department of Education at California State University-Chico. **SUSAN COLBY** is an assistant professor, **LINDA PACIFICI** an associate professor, **SANDRA OLDENDORF** an associate professor, **ROBIN GROCE** an assistant professor, and **ERIC GROCE** an assistant professor, all in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.

The children of migrant workers are broadly defined as those 17-years-old or younger who are affected by their parents' migration for work, they include both children who travel with their parents to a town or city and those that remain in their hometown while one or both parents migrate. The most recent data, based on the 2015 1% National Population Sample Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, puts the total number of children of migrant workers at around 103 million or about 38 percent of the total number of children in China. Regardless of their location or hukou status, the children of migrant workers in China all face a range of broadly similar issues; unequal access to family support, education, healthcare, and community and social support. Family support. Children of migrant workers lining up for lunch in an unofficial school in Beijing. CreditCreditKevin Frayer/Getty Images. By Emily Feng. March 29, 2016. Stories of suicides by children in such circumstances surface periodically in the Chinese news media. In January 2014, a 9-year-old boy in Anhui Province hanged himself after learning that his mother would not be coming home for the Lunar New Year. The need for more reliable statistics was also mentioned in a directive issued in February by the State Council, China's cabinet, setting out goals for the care of left-behind children in rural areas under the newly established Department of Social Affairs.