



Luchamos Juntos! We Struggle Together!
Organizing for Education with the
Farmworker Community

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Abstract

This study examines the emerging process of participation and activism of Mexican and Mexican American migrant farmworkers in the schooling of their children through their narratives and oral histories, contextualized in selected schools and rural communities of Southern California. Equitable and participatory collaborations between migrant parents and their children's school personnel hold the potential to benefit school achievement among these students, a population whose school performance has historically lagged substantially behind their peers. This study addresses the following questions: What are the dispositions, interactions, events and contexts that support the participation, advocacy, and activism of migrant farm worker parents in the schooling of their children?

Keywords: *Migrant Education; Community Education; Community Organizing*

Introduction

This study examines the emerging process of participation, advocacy, and activism of migrant farmworker parents in their children's schooling, contextualized in selected schools and communities in Southern California. This ethnographic study explores dispositions, interactions, and interventions that facilitate these parents' participation and promote stronger school-family partnerships. Increased equitable and participatory collaborations between migrant parents and their children's school personnel hold the potential to benefit school achievement among these students, a population whose school performance has historically lagged substantially behind their peers (Migrant Education Program, 2018; Jasis and Marriott, 2010; Nuñez, 2009). Through their narratives, parents, caregivers, and community advocates chronicle and analyze their process of activism and specific events, interactions, and dispositions that impact power

relationships within and outside schools to support the education of migrant children. This study addresses the following question: What are the dispositions, interactions, interventions, events, and contexts that support the participation, advocacy, and activism of migrant farmworker parents and families in the schooling of their children?

California Migrant Farmworkers: Their Status, their Children

Southern California is a land of dramatic socio-economic and cultural contrasts between diverse communities, where an abundance of wealth thrives next to pockets of extreme poverty. The manicured lawns of some of the nation's wealthiest counties stand as a stark contrast to the extreme poverty of agricultural communities located a few miles from these urban and suburban centers. This expansive Pacific coast and

inland desert region live a sizable portion of the estimated 650,000 California *Jornaleros* /Spanish for migrant seasonal farmworkers (EDD, 2019). They help tend over a million acres of regional farmland, sustaining the area's vibrant agricultural economy, ranging from dairy farms and field crops to nursery products and floriculture. The extraordinary development of the state's agribusiness over generations often disguises the harsh realities of life among farmworker families and communities: 96% of the area's agricultural workforce is Latino/a, of which 92% are of Mexican origin or ancestry (Rodriguez, Toller, & Dowling, 2003; Martin, 2016). Farm work is associated with the highest poverty rate of any occupation; 61% of all California's migrant workers live in poverty (NAWS, 2016). For the children of seasonal farm laborers, the situation is significantly bleaker; by the time a migrant child is 12, he/she may work the fields 16-18 hours per week, leaving little time for schoolwork (SAF, 2011). Poor education, economic, health, and harsh working conditions contribute to higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement ([Zalaquett, McHatton, & Cranston-Gingras, 2007](#); California Department of Education, 2007; [LaCroix, 2007](#)). According to data from the Migrant Education Program (2017), 91% of migratory students in this expansive area are not meeting state performance standards, with 66% scoring below math, reading, and writing standards.

Moreover, 76% of them lack knowledge in mathematical concepts, critical areas required for local in-demand job prospects (California Department of Education, 2017). Among secondary school students, migrant students impacted by adverse socio-economic circumstances are the least likely to graduate from high school, take college prep coursework, and enroll in college (Kindler, 2002; Nuñez, 2009; [Velazquez, 1996](#)). The children of migrant farmworker families are at risk

of various debilitating exposures such as child labor, family separation, depression, and anxiety that far exceed the general population and their non-migratory Latino peers (Migrant Education Program, 2017; Kupersmidt, 1997). Recent educational data reveal that these negative factors are also compounded by the highest rate of English learners among migrant youth - 81% by grade 3-, and a prevalent "culture of migrancy" (Bughra and Becker, 2005), which describes them as most in need for urgent and specialized targeted support (Migrant Education Program, 2017; Taylor & Ruiz, 2017; Grinding & Poggio, 2009). In the words of Perry (1997), "with so many obstacles in the path of their educational success, rural migrant students may be the most disadvantaged student population in America" (as in Romanowsky, 2010, p.27).

The bleak educational and life indicators of migrant children point towards more comprehensive, precisely targeted, and culturally appropriate strategies to address this student population's specific challenges. The needs and strengths of migrant students have been the focus of educational researchers, practitioners, and advocates over several decades, who have identified core challenges that, if corrected, can address migrant students' disadvantaged status and improve their chances to succeed academically. Among the most salient factors potentially impacting the school achievement of migrant children is the need to create and strengthen partnerships between school personnel and the student's families (Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Jasis and Marriott, 2010; Lundy-Ponce, 2010; Lam, 1997; NCBE, 2001; Salinas, 2007; US Department of Education, 2006). This study focuses on a selected group of migrant farmworker parents who have become activists and advocates for the improved education of migrant students.



Parent Organizing towards School-Family Partnerships

There is an emerging scholarship focusing on the school and community-based activism of parents and caregivers from low-income communities of color, which has become particularly relevant since the early 2000s (Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005; Lareau, 1994; Warren and Mapp, 2011). Recent literature suggests an increased interest in initiatives to strengthen family-school partnerships from education scholars and practitioners alike to improve students' school experience from historically under-served communities (Fennimore, 2017; Funkhouser and Gonzalez, 1997; Worg, 2011). Several of these studies examine local experiences of community empowerment, exploring how – and to what extent – a process of parent organizing and increased participation in school communities holds the potential of reversing generations of unequal relations between families of color and school personnel, improving education for all students (Cattone, Chung, and Oh, 2011; Rogers, 2011; Warren and Mapp, 2011). Low-income families' engagement in their children's schooling often occurs in contexts of poverty and unequal balances of power between school institutions and historically underserved communities (Auerbach, 2007; Jasis, 2019; Lareau, 2012; Warren and Mapp, 2011).

Community struggles for meaningful education, and more specifically parent organization around schooling, are not new, and they have been at the heart of historical movements for civil rights, as they are powerful tools for social change (Cooper, 2009; Delgado Gaitan, 2004; Fraga and Frost, 2011; Jasis and Jasis-Ordoñez, 2005; Orr and Rogers, 2011; Warren, 2011).

Methods

This study is an ethnographic exploration of the diverse motivations, rationales, and socio-cultural contexts of the process of advocacy and activism among a group of migrant farmworker parents in Southern California. It examines their individual and their collective narratives and personal reflections that fuel their school and community-based engagement in their children's schooling and the life of their community. This effort reflects the selected proceedings of over a hundred hours of on-site observations at migrant parent meetings, as well as twenty hours of interviews with participant farmworker parents. The resulting data – most of it originally in Spanish – was transcribed, organized thematically, and translated by the author, and then shared with the informants for increased accuracy and accountability.

For this study, the positionality of the author is that of a participant observant. Weiss said (1998), this stance involves participation by the investigator during the processes, activities, and events examined “as a way to get close to the action, and get a feel for what things mean to the actors” (p. 257). The author’s personal history and experiences as a Latino immigrant and an educator provide intrinsic familiarity with the activities and issues presented in this study. As a long-time education activist with the migrant community, the author knows many core issues impacting the participants' lives. However, throughout this exploration, his “first priority is the observation,” as emphasized by Weiss (1998), to capture and analyze events and processes “with all its emotional aura” (p.57). This ethnographic approach is informed by Ghans (1962). They explored the vagaries of life and its deeper meanings and informants' social contexts by eliciting the reflections, feelings, and daily activities from his voluntary informants. The participants were interviewed



and observed in their preferred milieu. In the schools their children attend, during student advocacy meetings, at community events, or in locations they choose.

Participation in this ethnographic study was voluntary and involved ten families, identified here with pseudonyms, which were interviewed individually and collectively. This approach involved purposeful sampling, which in the words of Weiss (1998), is useful when the researcher “is interested in data not just on average participants” but on a specific set of informants. This determination is vital because school-based activism among migrant parents is an emerging and dynamic phenomenon. It is so new that most migrant parents have yet to engage. However, this community's highly motivated and growing segment takes leadership and supporting roles among this historically underserved working population.

The informants in this study were selected using the following criteria: a) being a migrant farm worker parent or caregiver with children in public K-12 schools, b) participating in an organized parent group or program advocating for enhanced migrant student schooling, and c) familiarity with the issues, strengths, and challenges facing the migrant population. Their narratives are examined as *testimonials* (Beverley, 2005). This approach validates everyday subjects' reflections and understands them as critical units of analysis, with the potential of capturing the meanings of socio-cultural and political junctures. Bertaux and Kohli (1984) posed that oral narratives such as these can potentially encapsulate complex socio-historical and ideological processes along these lines. Close to the ethnographic stance adopted throughout this study, they see these oral narratives as valuable tools to examine the participants' dispositions and motivations and inquire into their implications within larger social and pedagogical contexts. At the same time, Osterling (2001) poses that local

communities should be seen as critical sources and valuable assets for their revitalization and growth with their histories and struggles.

Migrant Parents Becoming Education Activists

Pedro García is a solidly built farmworker who grew up on a small ranch in Central Mexico's highlands. He remembers a small rural school near his childhood home, which offered instruction up to the fifth grade and, most importantly, a simple lunch (“almuerzo”) every weekday around 11:30 in the morning. It also had a stringent set of teachers, one of whom often hit young Pedro with a ruler if he talked out of order, did not finish the homework on time, or forgot to bring a notebook and pencil to school. It did not matter to that teacher that the rancher, who owned most of the local land, demanded that little Pedro milk the cows, feed the animals, clean up the stables, or help with the crops often before heading to school early in the morning. The school's demands were the same. It is no wonder then that some of his early schooling memories are not very pleasant or that he dropped out midway into the third grade. Mr. Aguilar is 46 years old now, but by the time he migrated to the California fields three decades ago, his main concern was not schooling – it was survival. Survival meant finding a paying job in agriculture and putting a roof over his head. After having worked 12 to 14 hours daily for over thirty years, often migrating through countless farms and ranches spanning many coastal areas of the Western states, Mr. García, the proud father of three, has now a very distinct view of the importance of education.

I don't ever want my kids to work as hard as I have to. And to make sure they understand how important it is to be good students, do their homework, and respect their teachers, I take them to work with me at least once in the

summer for the whole day twice a year, picking up lettuce, cutting lemons from trees, picking oranges and tomatoes. I see them sweating, see their hands bleed, feel their head getting hot from the sun, and not making much money from all of that at the end of the day. Then I tell them: Now you go and study to get a better life.

Mr. García and his wife Elodia do not limit themselves to reminding their children every day about the importance of school and homework. They also advocate strongly for them and other migrant students at their school. For three years now, the Garcías have become active participants in a group of migrant parents sponsored by their local branch of the Migrant Education Program (MEP). Mrs. García is also an MEP regional leader, elected to represent migrant parents like herself and her husband at state-wide meetings. Educational and organizing strategies to support farmworker families are discussed for implementation at the local level. She is also studying independently to graduate from a high school equivalency program to share the importance of education with her children.

Today, at a small meeting attended by nine migrant parents and grandparents, Mrs. García remembers her introduction to educational advocacy in the following terms:

I did not know anything about helping my children at school, sometimes I would attend school functions, but I did not know what they were talking about and how important they really were. Then a *comadre* of mine commented to me about how the *programa* (MEP) helped her daughters, and that motivated me. There I learned a lot, made good friendships, and began to talk more at the meetings.

As Mrs. García became more engaged in activism, terms such as “outreach,” “policies,” “budget,” and “outcomes,” or their close translation in Spanish, also became more familiar to her in her interactions with school personnel and, just as importantly, with fellow parent advocates. Mrs. García often works beside her husband in the local fields to make ends meet, but she still makes a point of attending –and often leading– as many school-based and community-based parent meetings as possible. She also collaborates with other migrant parents in supporting activities that do not require in-person meetings. These collaborations include creating and updating a phone tree to communicate to all students’ families, organizing potlucks and childcare for adult education classes, and reaching out to families in need when jobs are scarce and local conditions deteriorate. A vivid example of the latter was a food and protective gear collection effort she helped organize with other parents when massive wildfires decimated California’s rural areas. During this time, farmworkers worked every one of those hazy days to feed their families. She is confident that her children, a set of twin boys in middle school and a girl in second grade, are doing better in school because of their advocacy and her increasingly stronger connections to the schools’ teachers. She states her case in the following terms:

I think that my children’s teachers are listening to me better now, and I understand them better, too. We got to know and respect each other more now; we do activities together when we can; I know now how to support their work, how to help my children and other families.

Mariela Cruz, a young mother in attendance at the local MEP meeting, is a new participant in this advocacy group. Her son, a second-grader who is a special needs student, is often supported by an in-classroom aide,

which helped him make notable academic progress. She adds a unique perspective to the conversation:

My son is being helped right now, but I know there are other services he should have, but I need to request them. Being part of this group of parents helped me find out more about the services and to ask for them *con más ganas* (more forcefully).

The struggle of mainstream families with special needs children to access educational and support services from schools and school districts is well documented (Wright, 2017). However, Mrs. Cruz believes that the quest for services is challenging because she is a farmworker, and her situation is not always understood by school personnel.

People at the school don't know about the problems we face each day. I am a single mother, and I don't have a car, so I depend on the school bus for my son to go to school; and also, because of my schedule at the nursery where I work, I cannot attend most school meetings. My mom helps me when she can, but she can't go to speak to the teacher most afternoons.

Mrs. Cruz is confident that her emerging advocacy with migrant parents is already making a positive difference. When she needs to make her case for additional support for her son, she is equipped with more information. Mrs. Cruz now interacts with teachers, administrators, or other school personnel as part of a larger and more organized parent group. She shares that she also counts on her migrant parent peers when she needs to convey a message to school personnel and cannot be there in person.

Parent to parent solidarity, particularly among migrant mothers, is a theme that resonates strongly among these participants. Fabiola Troncoso is a mother

of two students at the local elementary school, a fifth-grade girl and a third-grade boy. Her husband is a ranch worker on a farm almost a hundred miles away, and as a spouse of a farmworker, she is also considered a migrant parent. Since she stays at home raising the children, she sees herself as a communicator for a larger and, at times, hard-to-reach group of migrant parents.

I have a bit more time at home than many of the other *compañeras* (partners, companions) here, so when we or the school organize an activity, I am the one who calls many of the parents that work all day, live in ranches far from here, and cannot go to the school or talk to the teachers. Sometimes the kids don't tell their parents about the meetings, so I sit down with the *reclutadora* (recruiter), and we go over the list to see who has not been coming to the *juntas* (meetings), and we call them or send them the information any way we can.

These parents meet regularly at the small local office of the Migrant Education Program. At these meetings, every other Saturday morning, and between sips of coffee and bites of fresh Mexican pastries, the participants have an opportunity to share their concerns, suggestions, initiatives, events, and activities taking place at the schools their children attend. Often their concerns and achievements mirror the issues faced by many other migrant parents across the state, which are discussed and acted upon at larger events with the local representation of parents such as Elodia García. She reflects on her participation at regional migrant parents' meetings:

It is really important to share with other families the conversations we have here. One can get a lot of information from the larger meetings; I love going there when I can. But the most important thing is to make sure that many other

families that don't even know about migrant programs come and join us. It's the only way to make things better for our children.

Her insight also resonates in the reflections of Alicia and Adrián Alcázar, a middle-aged couple who are active participants at all parent meetings in this area. They have, over the years, advocated for the educational rights and opportunities of migrant children and students with special needs in their local district. MEP has been actively recruiting and training parents such as the Alcázars towards more significant educational equity with these families.

In the beginning, it was only about getting services for our youngest boy, and then we realized that most immigrant parents like ourselves didn't know what their rights were, and they were getting ignored by schools. Although we both work full time, we decided to dedicate time to inform other families about their rights to ask, or even demand, a good education for their children.

Alejandro Martínez, an experienced organizer and educator, working for MEP, is a vital force in the local efforts at organizing migrant parents in Southern California. He sees the process of migrant parent advocacy with a measured yet enthusiastic perspective.

Ours is a population that faces many obstacles, such as isolation, marginalization, poverty, limited English language skills, and also lack of experience when it comes to advocating for themselves and their families. On top of that, many of them face immigration status issues and have to live in an environment of anti-immigrant sentiments. And even in that situation, they still fight for their children, and I can tell you that we are making a lot of progress together!

During our conversation, Mr. Martínez adds that, even with all of the progress made, there are thousands of eligible migrant families with children in K-12 grades nationwide that their program has yet to reach. In the words of Mr. Martínez,

There are many barriers to the school success of migrant children, and an essential tool to make these activities successful is parent-to-parent support and solidarity.

The Workings of Solidarity

There are diverse notions of solidarity in the literature. For example, Durkheim (as in Kolers, 2017) loosely defined social solidarity as collective conscience and as “the bonds that tie us together” (p. 2). However, Kolers’ also suggested that the idea of solidarity somehow undermines individual agency, posing that collective solidarity can override one’s conscience and sense of individual autonomy. In contrast to this view, the process of collective solidarity emerging among these migrant parent activists, as illustrated here, is overtly conscious and motivated by their agency. Their notion of solidarity is closer to Tishner (1981), who describes it as an *ethics of conscience*. Tishner argues a sense of solidarity awakens the “goodwill in people” and also that it is essentially born out of the establishment of a “reliable dialogue” (p. 42). which “grows out as an assumption that must be accepted –explicitly or implicitly- by both sides: neither you nor I can learn the truth about each other if we remain distanced from one another, closed inside the walls of our fears” (p. 42).

Among these migrant parent-activists, they opt to engage in a community quest, actively working towards a positive vision of the collective future. They clearly understand that their work and emerging activism, as well as their daily support for one another, are the most effective means of achieving a meaningful education for

their children and their best shot at disrupting generational cycles of poverty. These dispositions exemplify Mr. García's societal value of education and his parental lessons to his children about work and life. Additionally, the regional advocacy of Elodia García, the committed activism of Mrs. Cruz, and the quiet, behind-the-scenes work of Mrs. Troncoso are commendable and assist the cause greatly. The program's recruiter regularly reaches out to migrant families living in remote ranches to inform them about events and meetings at their children's schools as well.

Their reflections and actions indicate their individual choice towards collective action. They should be understood as a commitment towards cooperative action and public engagement in their children's education. They connect solidly with the views of Marion and Rogers (2011), as they advocate for increased civic involvement in schooling: "Public engagement is about translating shared interests into deliberate collective efforts to promote educational equality" (p. 10). They also pose that collective, community-based work such as the one described here requires "collective thinking, and an understanding of interdependence" (p. 10). Low-income communities and families rely on that *interdependence* for survival, especially in challenging times. Furthermore, these are, indeed, challenging times; these parents' committed advocacy stands against a backdrop of increased hostility towards immigrant communities, where these families are often seen in official spheres with suspicion and animosity and even as undeserving of any educational or social services (Orr and Rogers, 2011).

The activism of these migrant parents also emerges in response to a historical legacy of marginalization and lack of political power—this lack of power results from their sparse representation at the local and regional political levels. Their non-inclusive

composition of many school boards, school administration, academia, and lack of representative voices in other educational and social institutions with decision-making in school policy also affects their status (Jasis and Ordonez-Jasis, 2005; Marion and Rogers, 2011). Within this challenging context, the emerging process of activism among a group of migrant parent activists is an indication of how low-income communities have, over generations, learned to strengthen their common bonds of solidarity. This is a committed engagement, which is ethically informed by a pragmatic and hopeful approach to solidarity, a moral stance where, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2014) posed decades ago, "there is no true solidarity without hope" (p. 63). In sum, their organizing work is strongly motivated by a sense of communal solidarity, informed by a hopeful vision of a better future for their children—the children beyond their immediate families, all migrant children, and all the community's children.

Impacting Schools, Impacting Lives

Several recent studies have focused on the potential of community organizing work to positively alter the relationships between diverse families and schools, particularly in contexts of unequal educational opportunities for low-income communities and communities of color (Fennimore, 2017; Jasis and Ordonez-Jasis, 2005; Jasis and Marriott, 2010; Warren and Mapp, 2011; Worg, 2011). As underserved communities develop increased agency and voice, they can impact social and educational policies at the local level, advancing their dynamics of grassroots participation in the process, articulating what Lichterman (1996) calls their unique "grammar of democracy." Recent literature also illustrates how families who had been socially and politically marginalized, and often weary of social activism, can develop a significant



capacity to mobilize when it comes to fighting for their children's schooling and towards a better collective future (Fraga and Frost, 2011; Hong, 2011; Jasis and Marriott, 2010).

At the local and regional levels, activist engagement of low-income parents in schools is supported by non-profit coalitions, grassroots parent organizations, and community activists in many locations across the nation. This support advances the community's expertise and efficacy towards educational inclusion and equity for all students (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2011; Martinez-Cossio, 2010; Jasis and Ordonez Jasis, 2005). As illustrated through the reflections and actions of the migrant parents in this study, the capacity of community organizing to change the educational landscape towards increased equity can make a difference where it matters: at the local level. In the words of Warren and Mapp (2011), "organizing groups can help build a political constituency with the power to demand school improvement and hold systems accountable" (p. 5).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The interactions and dispositions examined here vividly describe the pedagogic potentials -and indeed, the urgency- to establish more substantial and more equitable partnerships between migrant families and schools to support the school experience of migrant students. The activism process among these parents, emerging amid a challenging socio-economic and cultural environment, demonstrates the value these families place on their children's education and the strong bonds of solidarity that contextualize their collective commitment to their children's future. These migrant parent activists emphasized the need to support schools' work any way they can throughout these observations and conversations. The parents'

determination to dedicate all necessary time and efforts to strengthen their bonds of solidarity and engage with teachers and administrators to improve their children's school experience and academic outcomes is of utmost importance. To do so, they need a more substantial commitment from schools to understand and respect their context and strengths and engage with them to fulfill their joint vision of educational improvement.

The opportunities to build stronger partnerships between schools and migrant families hold the promise of meaningful education and a brighter future for migrant students. Moreover, *partnerships*, in the words of Little (2011), "can serve to strengthen, support, and even transform individual partners, resulting in improved program quality, more efficient use of resources, and better alignment of goals and curricula" in schools (p. 1). Partnerships, in this context, also require an *empowerment approach* (Jasis, 2019), that is, a commitment to an equal, inclusive understanding of issues, an honest inquiry about the strengths and challenges of each partner, and a shared vision of success for all students. In practical terms, and based on the conversations with this group of migrant parents, schools and school districts should consider these initiatives: a) Identify students from migrant farmworker backgrounds as early as possible, to allow parents and caregivers to connect their families to the programs and services available to them, as well as to contact their peer support networks: b) School personnel should be comprehensively informed and sensitized about the cultural assets, as well as the socio-economic strengths and challenges of the farmworker families and communities: c) A stronger partnership should be established between schools and the Migrant Education Program (MEP), as well as with informal parent networks, to maximize opportunities for migrant parents to receive critical information, and meet independently



with transportation, appropriate translation and childcare when needed: d) Migrant parents should be provided increased opportunities for quality participation in their children's schooling. Creating opportunities for these families means addressing the logistical challenges they face by planning for modified school events and meetings to take place when the parents' work schedules allow for them, with an understanding of the migrant nature of agricultural work, with its specific seasonal requirements and limitations: and e) Diverse programs serving the needs of migrant families, as well as farmworker organizations, should provide opportunities to support the visibility and efficacy of the migrant parent's voices in education and society, including training in leadership development, public speaking, and a comprehensive program of awareness regarding the educational rights of all students. There is excellent pedagogical potential in the commitment, dedication, work ethics, and ingenuity of the migrant family. It is up to us, education practitioners and scholars, to tap into this great reservoir of opportunity and talent to support the success of migrant students in our schools.



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