



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Migrant mothers becoming active agents in a United States Midwestern context: Building strengths by breaking down the outside-inside barrier

Judith A. Gouwens*, Roosevelt University, Illinois.

Robyn Henderson, University of Southern Queensland.

*Corresponding Author: jgouwens@roosevelt.edu

Abstract

In the current context of extensive national and cross-cultural migration, the education of migrant and refugee children is an important and critical consideration. In the U.S., the education of migrant children—who move with their farm worker parents within states, across state borders and sometimes across national borders—brings challenges that relate to educational discontinuity as well as the cultural contexts and expectations of schooling. This article reports on research that investigated a family literacy program that catered for migrant families in one rural location in the United States Midwest. Through a multipronged approach, the program supported children's early literacy development, provided adult education including English language instruction and parenting education, and offered liaison between the parents and their children's schools. Research data were collected through interviews with migrant mothers who participated in the program. Using Gee's (1996) notion of Discourse, the article considers the way that the program enabled the mothers to negotiate the outside-inside barrier of the rural community. By building their skills and strategies, the mothers were developing into active agents who could participate in their children's education in ways that community outsiders could not usually do

Keywords: belonging, Discourses, family literacy, migrant education, mobility, parent education

Introduction

In December 2015, Kingsley reported the International Organization for Migration (IOM) statistic that more than 1 million refugees and migrants had entered Europe during 2015. In the context of such extensive cross-national and cross-cultural migration, and the disrupted education that can result for children, it is critical that educators consider how migrant and refugee children and their families can be included in formal school education.

In general, the term *migrant* refers to those who travel from one location to another, usually seeking work or improved living conditions. However, its meaning varies in different contexts. In Australia, the terms *immigrant* and *emigrant*—derivatives of *migrant*—distinguish between those who have arrived in the country and those who have departed. In the U.S., the term *migrant* has a more specific meaning, describing migratory seasonal agricultural and fishing industry workers and their children. As Gouwens (2001) explained, some migrant workers “travel from state to state, others from work site to work site within one state, and still others travel from Mexico and other countries to the United States for work and then back to their home countries” (p. 3). In other words, U.S. migrant farm workers are a diverse group, often recognised for their cultural and linguistic diversity and the difficulties experienced by their children in relation to education.

Children who migrate with their families experience educational discontinuity at the very least; many of them also face cultural contexts and expectations in schools that are very different from their previous experiences, and some have had no schooling at all (Dudley-Marling, 2009). In the U.S., federal compensatory education since 1966 has included a program specifically addressing the issues faced by children of migrant workers (Gouwens, 2001). The Migrant Education Program supports “high quality education programs for migratory children,” helping to “ensure that migratory children who move among the states are not penalized in any manner by disparities among states in curriculum, graduation requirements, or state academic content and student academic achievement standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

U.S. migrant education has sometimes included a family literacy component to support children’s literacy development, as well as to provide adult education including English language instruction and parenting education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a, n.d.). As part of the program, Home Educators often function between home and school, helping parents understand teachers’ and schools’ expectations. Such programs address the challenges of including migrant and refugee children and their families in communities, in education and in schooling. These challenges are particularly great in rural communities, where there may be fewer resources and the communities may be more insular.

The research reported in this article investigated a program that aimed to improve the literacy levels of migrant families in one rural location in the U.S. Midwest. The family literacy program used a multipronged approach that integrated parenting education, early childhood education and adult literacy education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The article begins with a discussion of family mobility and education, along with Gee’s (1996) conceptualisation of Discourses which provides a frame for considering the learning that migrant families need to do, in order to become accepted in the communities they join. This is followed by a description of the program, the research project and its findings.

Family mobility and education

In considering family mobility, researchers (e.g., Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2009; Gouwens, 2001; Henderson & Danaher, 2012) have recognised mobilities as a diverse and “highly contested and politicized contemporary sociocultural phenomenon” (Henderson & Danaher, 2012, p. 360). The diversity has been evident, at the one extreme, in the glamour and prestige of those who enjoy the benefits of international travel on a regular basis for leisure purposes and, at the other, in the marginalisation and discrimination experienced by many mobile groups, especially those who move for occupational, cultural and traditional reasons (Henderson & Danaher, 2012). Research has indicated that occupationally mobile migrant workers are generally amongst the mobile groups who “are marginalised, ignored and disrespected” (Remy Leder, 2009, p. 214).

There is considerable evidence that occupationally mobile families and social groups across the world are often described in deficit terms (Danaher, Kenny, & Remy Leder, 2009). Henderson’s (2001, 2005, 2009) research has demonstrated how rural communities in the Australian context sometimes discount the efforts of those who come into communities temporarily—outsiders—to contribute to local wellbeing or to active and responsible citizenship more broadly. This is despite the fact that many rural communities could not survive economically without the input of mobile workers during harvesting time (McAllister, 2002; Henderson, 2005). With many rural communities in Australia, Canada and elsewhere experiencing economic distress and population decline over a long period of time (Alston, 2000, 2004; Corbett, 2007; Davis & Bartlett, 2008; Miller, 1993), the influx of mobile farm workers during harvesting seasons generally provides an economic boost for ailing rural towns. It seems, though, that the positive effects are often

overshadowed by deficit stories that denounce mobile farm workers as untrustworthy, more interested in partying than being good citizens, and contributing to the deterioration of social stability in rural communities (Henderson, 2005, 2009).

In addition to the deficit stories, the materiality of farm work, including sun exposure, dust, plant stains and the smells of pesticides and sweat add to negative views of farm worker families (Henderson, 2005, 2009; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013). Many farm workers are also “marked” (Davies & Hunt, 2000) by their ethnicity and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This is particularly evident in the U.S. where so many migrant farm workers have travelled across the border from Mexico and countries in Central America. These characteristics of difference often identify migrant farm workers as outsiders in communities, thus setting them apart from those who reside there more permanently.

It is not surprising, then, that deficit discourses that circulate in some communities are also evident in schools that are located within those communities. Henderson (2001, 2008, 2009; Henderson & Woods, 2012) has shown how these discourses are often resilient and perpetuate stereotypical views of mobile farm workers and their families. Nevertheless, despite such stories, there is also evidence that there are many schools and teachers who attempt to divert the deficit stories and to enable a more positive framing of mobile children and their families (see e.g., Henderson, 2015). Indeed, there is evidence of educators and education systems trying to redress the “dominant hegemony which assumes that migrant workers have neither a place in contemporary society nor a contribution to make” (Remy Leder, 2009, p. 215). As an example, the Henderson article in this issue shows how one school attempted to build a sense of community belonging for families new to a rural town.

In the U.S., compensatory education has been on offer for migrant workers’ children, as part of the Migrant Education Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a, 2016b) since 1966. The release of Murrow’s (1960) documentary *Harvest of Shame* raised public awareness about the plight of migrant workers, by exposing the terrible conditions in which they lived and worked, and the educational challenges for their children, especially those who were school-aged. Changes in 1966 to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 opened the way for the recruitment and education of migrant children (State Department of Education, Idaho, 2009). Since that time, migrant education programs have been instituted in all 50 states at one time or another, as agricultural workers have traveled for work throughout the U.S.

Gouwens (2001) highlighted that migrant children and youth in the U.S. learn “life’s lessons about hard work, about being tired and cold, about blisters and bruises, about missing home and friends and school” (p. 2), but they are often disadvantaged in formal education systems and they often underperform academically. As mentioned earlier, educational discontinuity is one challenge; however, poverty, low levels of English language proficiency and significant social disadvantage, through limited access to reading materials and other resources, have what Branz-Spall, Rosenthal and Wright (2003) described as “a lethal impact on the educational aspirations of migrant children” (p. 57). In addition, many migrant parents do not have the necessary abilities, background knowledge or education to assist their children with homework, even when they have high aspirations for their children (Gouwens, 2001; Henderson, 2001).

Discourse as a conceptual frame

Gee’s (1996) notion of Discourse, which deliberately uses a capital D, provides a useful way of framing learning as people join new social groups. Discourses are described by Gee as ways of “behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” (p.

viii). As Gee explained, everyone belongs to many Discourses. These ways of being, doing and knowing define social groups, but that definition is generally a “taken for granted and tacit ‘theory’ of what counts as a ‘normal’ person and the ‘right’ ways to think, feel and behave” (p. ix).

Gee’s (1996) theory provides a useful way of conceptualising the relationships between those who reside permanently in communities—insiders—and those who join communities temporarily—outsiders. In the case of migrant families whose relocations mean that they move into (and out of) communities, research has suggested that parents and children often find that fitting in and experiencing a sense of belonging in a new community—whether that is the school community or the community more broadly—can be difficult (Henderson, 2008; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013). Indeed, we have reported how some families have worked hard to buffer and protect themselves from some of the seemingly hostile communities where they reside temporarily (Henderson & Gouwens, 2013). In some cases, families act to ensure invisibility in particular communities while building support networks through family, language and culture (Henderson & Gouwens, 2013). An understanding of Gee’s concept of Discourses, therefore, is useful for explaining how outsiders joining a community need to find ways of negotiating the existing outside-inside barriers.

The program

In this article, we focus deliberately on the efforts of one family literacy program to help migrant families move across the outside-inside barrier. The program operated in a rural community in Midwestern U.S. To participate in the program, the families must have been legally “migrant.” To be considered “migrant” and eligible for initiatives funded through the federally-funded Migrant Education Program, families must have made a move of 75 miles or more for agricultural work in the past year. They must also have children whose ages range from birth through age seven. Once the family has made a qualifying move, they are eligible to participate for three years after the qualifying move or until none of their children are the appropriate ages for the program. Most of the families at this program site typically traveled for work between Texas and Illinois; when they were in Texas they were eligible to participate in a similar program there. A few of the families came directly from Mexico.

In the family literacy program, parents were expected to participate in their own education, through studying for the GED (a high school diploma equivalency) at a community college, or through English as a Second Language classes. They also participated in parenting education, and home visitors provided education services to their children and served as liaisons between the children’s schools and teachers and the parents.

The study

The intent of our research was to explore how the family literacy program assisted families to build a sense of belonging in the community they had joined. We conducted the research with university ethical clearance and permission from the family literacy centre. We collected data by interviewing nine mothers, who, along with their children and many of their spouses, were participants in the migrant education family literacy program. All the mothers had attended school in Mexico and they had not experienced first-hand the culture of U.S. schools. Their experiences of the family literacy program varied from a few months to three or four years. We also interviewed the Family Education Specialist who directed the program and the Parent Educator.

The interviews, which were semi-structured (Barbour & Schostak, 2005), were conducted at the site of the family literacy program, in the mothers' preferred language, English or Spanish. All but one of the mothers chose to be interviewed in Spanish; one preferred to be interviewed in English. For the interviews in Spanish, we used a translator who translated our questions from English to Spanish; she also translated the mothers' responses from Spanish to English. The mother who chose to be interviewed in English discussed in Spanish several of her responses with the translator before she provided her responses in English. Interviews with the Family Education Specialist and Parent Educator were conducted in English. All interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews in English and the translations of the interviews in Spanish were transcribed prior to the analysis of the data.

The data were analysed through both categorising and contextualising strategies (Maxwell, 1996; Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Maxwell (1996) argued that, while analysing data through categorising may serve the purpose of building a theory, contextualising strategies serve to provide the connections that lead to a rich description of an individual setting. Our goal was both to understand what a migrant family literacy program meant to mothers who participated in it, and to develop a rich and deep understanding of how this family literacy program helped participants to bridge the gap between being outsider and insider. The former was achieved through categorising, which meant that we were looking for "resemblances or common features", while the latter was achieved through contextualizing, which involved looking for "connections between things" (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 462).

The mothers

As the mothers arrived for our interviews, it was clear that they were comfortable at the family literacy centre and with one another and the centre's staff. There were familiar greetings and hugs, as well as lots of conversation. The preschoolers who arrived with their mothers were also comfortable. They greeted the staff members as they entered the centre, and they quickly found books to look at or paper and crayons and sat down at the child-sized table to draw and colour. The mothers seemed eager to tell us about the family literacy program, their involvement in it, and the benefits they saw for themselves and their children from the program.

Even though the interviews did not actually include questions that would invite evaluation of the family literacy program, the mothers found ways to praise the program and the staff. Some told how the program had helped them to feel at home in what was to them a foreign community, some described how they had learned parenting skills through the parent education sessions, and they all praised the benefits of the visits the Home Educators made and the work the Home Educators did with their children. All of the mothers who had children who were too old to participate in the program expressed the wish that the program would be expanded to include their older children.

All of the mothers interviewed had high expectations for their children to succeed academically and personally in the U.S. They all spoke about the family literacy program helping them to be able to assist their children with homework in general, and to understand the importance of the children reading at home, in both English and Spanish. One mother described her and her husband's expectation that their three children would be fully bilingual in Spanish and English, and that they would also like the children to learn a third language. She and her husband were working to set the expectation for all three of their children to go to college. She said that they tell their children "when you go to college," not "if you go to college." Another mother described her children's aspirations of becoming a doctor or a veterinarian. Although the children were still in elementary (primary) school, the family had opened bank accounts to save for the

children's education in the future. She said that sometimes when the family was shopping, her son would opt not to have a toy or a snack, asking her instead to put the money in his account for when he got older.

Most of the mothers talked about studying and learning themselves, mostly to learn English, but also to be better parents. They believed it was important to know English to help their children be successful in school. But they also explained that they wanted their children to see them as learners, as they wanted to be models for their children. Mothers described working with or observing the Home Educators work with their children, in order to learn also how to teach their children at home.

Explaining that she had not had the opportunity for post-secondary education, the mother of two daughters said that she wanted her children to be able to do and achieve more than she had. She described working with her children at home to read and do homework, because, she said, "My dream is that [her children] go to university or college, so that is why I try to keep them focused on the school and study."

One mother described making posters with her children of what they want to be when they grow up. They put the posters on the ceiling above their beds so that they see them first thing when they wake up in the morning. One of her son's goals was to make a million dollars, and his poster had a picture of a big jar of money on it. This mother spoke at length about learning along with her children so that she could help them with their schoolwork.

The mothers whose children were in school all described being comfortable interacting with teachers and schools, with several of them explaining that they had learned from the Parent Educator and the Home Educators in the family literacy program about what the schools and teachers expect. The week prior to the interviews, the public schools had held conferences with parents, and all the mothers whose children were in school had attended the conferences with their children's teachers. Several described the parent-teacher conferences as opportunities, not only to learn about how their children were doing in school, but also to help the teachers know their children better. One mother described volunteering in her son's classroom, participating in the Parent Teacher Organization (known as a Parents and Citizens' Association in some countries), and helping with fund-raising for the school, explaining that not enough parents supported the schools and the teachers.

The mothers' involvement in the schools did not consist only of passive attendance and classroom support. Several of them explained that they had also been involved in making decisions about their children's placement in school or in school programs. One mother of two school-aged children had opted her older child out of the bilingual program, against the advisement of the school. She believed that the program available to him, a pull-out program for a few hours each day, served only to confuse him and to keep him from important learning experiences in his regular classroom. At the same time, she had decided that her younger son should be placed in a classroom where there was instruction in both English and Spanish.

Another mother had declined a bilingual program for her children because she wanted them to function fully in English. She said, "The life, it is – the computer, that's not bilingual. Some places are not bilingual, so the life, it is in English. So maybe later they have to learn Spanish, but not right now." She argued, "It is my daughter, it is my decision, so my decision is that she goes to English classes." Conceding that her children speak both English and Spanish at home, this mother maintained that it was her responsibility to teach her daughter Spanish, not the school's.

It was clear in the mother's interviews that they believed that the family literacy program was making a difference in their lives and the lives of their children involved in the program. It was also evident that the mothers actively engaged with a range of educational activities at their children's schools and outside the school context.

The family literacy program staff

For the mothers interviewed, it was clear that the family literacy program staff were the heart of the program. Mothers and their children arriving for interviews greeted the program staff members at the centre warmly, with hugs, and they all had information to share with the program staff. Every mother spoke of the value of the Home Educators, who visited each child in the program for an hour a week. In the case of families who had more than one child in the program, that translated into extended visits with the Home Educators. One of the mothers who had twin boys in the program and who initially had known no one in the community described looking forward to the Home Educator's two-hour visit to her home, underscoring the importance of the social connection the mother and her children had made to the Home Educator.

All the mothers interviewed described how much they had learned from the Home Educators. One mother explained that she had not known effective strategies for teaching her children at home, and that prior to being in the program, she and her child had been frustrated with trying to read together. The Home Educator introduced a range of strategies that helped the mother engage in reading and writing activities with her children. These were fun activities for mothers and children in their places of residence, rather than formal strategies that might be used by teachers in classrooms. According to the mother, these had changed reading with her child into a pleasurable activity. Another mother explained that she was not only working with her own children as a result of the Home Educator's modeling, but that she was also working with her niece and nephew. Home Educators also served as liaisons between the school and home, communicating with each school-aged child's teacher and sharing that communication with the parents.

The Family Education Specialist's and the Parent Educator's empathy for the parents and children in the family literacy program was evident in many ways. Both of the program staff spoke Spanish (as their first language), and both of them had been raised in migrant farmworker families. They understood the lifeworld of the migrant families their program served. They had both had the experience of arriving in a new community knowing no one and having to negotiate a community that was foreign to them.

According to the Parent Educator, the Family Education Specialist built relationships with the families that extended far beyond what her administrative role in the program might have expected or required. She said:

It wasn't a matter of her going in and enrolling parents and then sending the home visitors off to do the home visits and from time to time touching base with them. . . . She's in constant communication with them. . . . She basically finds out where the family is at as a family, what needs they may have, what interests they may have, and then she follows through on providing any type of support that [they need] to help them function in order to help them meet their needs.

The Family Education Specialist herself had had experiences similar to those of the families the program served. She said, "When I came to the United States, I speak only Spanish. I don't

understand nothing of English and two persons helped me . . . a lot. And I feel, I want to help other families.” She was fortunate to have people who helped her to find and access the services she needed when she first arrived in the community. Those people helped her to find a job at a church that allowed her to become familiar with and make contacts with the many services available in the community, a network that served her well when working with the families in the family literacy program. According to the Parent Educator, the Family Education Specialist related to the families because she had had the experiences they had:

She will be upfront with them and honest about the things that she herself has had to deal with and had to face, and she uses her own personal stories and background to allow them to see how she has managed to overcome certain things . . . She tells them, “If I was able to do this, you can do this.”

Studying English herself and preparing for the United States citizenship test, the Family Education Specialist invited parents in the program to study along with her. During her four-year tenure in the position at the time of her interview, she had not only applied for and earned U.S. citizenship, but she had also coached and mentored four parents to earn U.S. citizenship as well. As she continued to study English and take English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, she invited parents from the family literacy program to join her. In fact, she herself provided transportation to parents willing to take ESL classes at the same time.

The Family Education Specialist, the Parent Educator, and all the family literacy program staff had created and maintained an environment that was comfortable and safe for the families and the children in the program. When mothers and their preschoolers arrived at the program site for interviews, it was clear that they felt comfortable and safe. It was obvious that they were walking into an environment that they knew. They said hello to the staff and the children immediately navigated themselves towards the books, writing equipment and toys that were available for their use and enjoyment. As the mothers talked about the family literacy program, their trust in the staff was evident.

Drawing on the network of community services she had built prior to her position at the family literacy program, the Family Education Specialist had established the program as a site for families to learn about and access needed assistance and services. But she did not wait for the families to come to her for assistance; she communicated regularly with the families to determine what services or assistance they might need and then to help them access the services or assistance. The Parent Educator said:

She’s not shy at all about going to the different agencies and making inquiries and looking for those resources. I think that in her personal life she had dealt with a lot of issues. She’s the one that they know that . . . they can pick up the phone . . . and whether it’s just having someone to talk to . . . to her providing them with the resources they need if they need to go further, to stay with the counseling or with an agency to report the abuse to . . . she’s going to be there for them.

The Parent Educator and Family Education Specialist also involved the parents in planning the parenting education they provided to the families. Both of them, according to their interviews, described the curriculum for parenting education as being developed jointly by the parents and the program staff, with much of it coming from the questions and experiences that parents had about parenting and about schools and teachers. The authenticity of the parenting education addressing issues identified by the parents likely is a factor in the commitment of parents to the parenting education.

One example of parenting education requested by the parents was how to communicate with and work with their children's schools and teachers. The Parent Educator described a session with a guest speaker who was a teacher, and the role-playing that parents did to understand the expectations schools and teachers had for parents. Home Educators also were involved in coaching parents in working with the schools and teachers. The mothers interviewed all attended their children's parent-teacher conferences and this served as evidence of the success of the Home Educators' and Parent Educator's modeling and coaching.

Factors that facilitated the mothers' movement from outsider to insider

Cultural information about rural communities and their schools is typically not explicit; children often go to the same schools their parents attended, and the school culture is inherited or "handed down" from parents to children (Bauch, 2001). Outsiders, children and parents, often struggle to understand and function within the culture of the communities and the schools, and deficit discourses often work against them (Henderson, 2001; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001).

All the mothers interviewed had arrived in the community as outsiders, with at least one member of their family being a migrant agricultural worker. Their home language was Spanish, and few of them spoke even a little English when they arrived. They had left their social systems behind in Mexico, or Texas, or Wisconsin. They had little cultural knowledge of the community nor did they have cultural knowledge of the schools, with most of them having attended schools in Mexico. For them, though, the family literacy program provided social connections and the opportunity to gain cultural knowledge of the community, as well as the schools.

Several factors of the family literacy program served to facilitate these mothers' movement from their status as outsider without the cultural knowledge of the community and the schools to having the cultural knowledge that would allow them, if not to be an insider, at least to approximate insider status in dealing with their children's schools and teachers.

First, the Family Education Specialist, the Parent Educator, and the Home Educators created a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment in the family literacy program. It was obvious as the mothers we interviewed entered the family literacy centre that they and their children felt comfortable there. One mother reported feeling very lonely because she was used to being with her mother and sisters; she said that the other parents and the centre staff had filled the role that her family had played for her when she lived in Mexico.

All the family literacy program staff members spoke Spanish; Spanish was the first language for all of them. Their varying levels of fluency in English both supported the mothers' English learning and served as models for them. The Family Education Specialist, for example, was participating in ESL classes along with some of the mothers. The Parent Educator, fluent in English, often worked with the mothers in both English and Spanish, helping them to translate and understand documents that they received in English. One example of her work in the two languages was that she asked that our consent form be provided in English, and then she worked with the mothers to translate the form into Spanish before they gave consent to participate in the study.

The literacy program staff members all had experienced the migrant way of life. They had all lived that experience, which helped them to connect with and empathise with the families in the program. That understanding and empathy formed the basis of a community of support for the families; it also helped the program staff to connect families with services and resources in the

community.

Perhaps most important in terms of helping the migrant mothers negotiate and understand the culture of the schools and the expectations of the schools and teachers was the mediating role that the family literacy program staff played. Home Educators regularly met with the teachers of children in the program, and communicated the teachers' expectations to the parents. The Home Educators also taught the parents how to read with their children, how to help their children with homework, and in general, how to teach their children at home. The Parent Educator planned and facilitated parent education sessions about interacting with schools and teachers that included simulation and role playing; that gave parents the opportunity to practise communicating with teachers and other school personnel. That mothers felt comfortable making decisions about their children's education, attending parent-teacher conferences at their children's schools, participating in Parent Teacher Organization meetings and fundraisers, and volunteering in their children's classrooms are all evidence of the mothers having gained the knowledge of the culture of the schools that allowed them to act almost as insiders there.

Conclusion

The analysis of the interview data showed that the mothers' participation in the family literacy program led interviewees to become active agents on their children's behalf and to feel as though they had the right to make decisions around schooling, and education more broadly, in the community that they had joined. That agency included setting academic goals with their children, making informed decisions about their children's participation in bilingual and special education, participating actively in parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering in their children's classrooms. They also made decisions about their own education and were learning English as well as parenting skills and strategies. Some mothers were studying in order to be able to sit for the U.S. citizenship test.

The mothers who were interviewed had arrived in the rural community as total outsiders—not having the cultural knowledge to function in the community or in their children's schools. The family literacy program demonstrated that it is possible to intervene to help such outsiders move toward becoming insiders in a rural community. It was evident in the interviews with the mothers and the family literacy program staff that the family literacy centre was a hub for the socio-development of the migrant families, particularly the mothers. The centre not only provided the mothers with opportunities for upskilling, but it scaffolded their movement into other areas of the local community. For example, the Home Educators provided links with schools and the Family Education Specialist encouraged mothers to attend ESL classes and invited them to attend with her, even offering to provide transport.

The opportunities provided by the family literacy centre enabled the mothers, as well as other members of their families, to learn how to be members of the community they had joined. It was clearly evident that the mothers and their young children were experiencing a sense of belonging in the family literacy centre itself and that the mothers were learning to engage in the social and cultural practices of the wider community outside the centre. In terms of Gee's (1996) notion of Discourses, the staff at the centre were assisting families to learn the ways of being, doing, knowing and saying that were used by insiders of the community. Although in some cases, the mothers were approximating such practices and were thus still learning, they had moved from being outsiders—newly arrived in the community and often ignorant of how aspects of the community, such as education, operated—to taking an active role in their children's education and in enhancing their own skills and qualifications.

The interviews with the mothers provided insights into the educational aspirations they had for their children and how they were working with their families and the schools their children attended to try to ensure that their children would be able to achieve educationally. The activities offered by the family literacy centre were an attempt to work against the educational discontinuity, low levels of English language proficiency and significant social disadvantage that have been identified as detrimental to many migrant families. By providing access to reading materials and other resources, those conducting the program were hoping to turn around the “lethal impact on the educational aspirations of migrant children” that was described by Branz-Spall, Rosenthal and Wright (2003, p. 57).

The family literacy program helped the mothers to gain information about the culture of the schools and the community that allowed them to approach, if not gain, insider status in their children’s schools, as well as in the community. It was the family literacy centre that mediated the mothers’ building of insider knowledge. By providing a safe haven where learning could occur, as well as offering ways of linking into the community more broadly, the centre and its staff were enabling the mothers to build a sense of agency. It seems, then, that the development of the migrant mothers’ agency was critical to family success and acceptance.

The data collected through the research project indicated that the centre was a successful hub of socio-development, building the migrant mothers’ strengths so that they could negotiate the inside-outside barrier. In particular, this process was facilitated by the safe environment created at the centre and the modelling, scaffolding and direct teaching from the centre’s staff. Although this research project focused directly on the centre and the people in that space, we would suspect that the development of the mothers’ agency and their abilities to negotiate the inside-outside barrier are likely to begin the challenging task of replacing deficit discourses within the community with more positive discourses.

References

- Alston, M. (2000). Rural poverty. *Australian Social Work*, 53(1), 29–34.
doi:10.1080/03124070008415554
- Alston, M. (2004). Who is down on the farm? Social aspects of Australian agriculture in the 21st century. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 21(3), 7–46.
doi:10.1023/B:AHUM.0000014019.84085.59
- Barbour, R. S., & Schostak, J. (2005). Interviewing and focus groups. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 41–48). London, UK: Sage.
- Bauch, P. A. (2001). School-community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76(2), 204–221.
- Branz-Spall, A. M., Rosenthal, R., & Wright, A. (2003). Children of the road: Migrant students, our nation's most mobile population. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 72(1), 55–62.
- Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community*. Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.
- Danaher, P. A., Kenny, M., & Remy Leder, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Traveller, nomadic and migrant education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Danaher, P. A., Moriarty, B., & Danaher, G. (2009). *Mobile learning communities: Creating new educational futures*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Davies, B., & Hunt, R. (2000). Classroom competencies and marginal positioning. In B. Davies (Ed.), *A body of writing 1990-1999* (pp. 107–131). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. (Reprinted from the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1994, 15(3), 389–408).
- Davis, S., & Bartlett, H. (2008). Healthy ageing in rural Australia: Issues and challenges. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 27(2), 56–60. doi:10.1111/j.1741-6612.2008.00296.x

- Dudley-Marling, C. (2009). Home-school literacy connections: The perceptions of African American and immigrant ESL parents in two urban communities. *Teachers College Record*, 111(7), 1713–1752.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Gouwens, J. A. (2001). *Migrant education: A reference handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Henderson, R. (2001). Student mobility: Moving beyond deficit views. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 11(1), 121–129.
- Henderson, R. (2005). An invasion of green-stained farm workers from outer space(s)? Or a rural community struggling with issues of itinerancy? *Education in Rural Australia*, 15(1), 3–13.
- Henderson, R. (2008). A boy behaving badly: Investigating teachers' assumptions about gender, behaviour, mobility and literacy learning. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 31(1), 74–87.
- Henderson, R. (2009). Itinerant farm workers' children in Australia: Learning from the experiences of one family. In P. A. Danaher, M. Kenny, & J. Remy Leder (Eds.), *Traveller, nomadic and migrant education* (pp. 46–58). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Henderson, R. (2015). Two conversations at once: Making sense of classroom observations. *English in Australia*, 50(3), 45–49.
- Henderson, R., & Danaher, P. A. (2012). Moving with the times: Pedagogies for mobile students. In C. Day (Ed.), *International handbook: Teacher and school development* (pp. 360–371). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Henderson, R., & Gouwens, J. A. (2013). Mobile farmworker families using cocoon communities to negotiate multiple lifeworlds. In M. Korpela & F. Dervin (Eds.), *"Cocoon communities": Togetherness in the 21st century* (pp. 105–121). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Henderson, R., & Woods, A. (2012). Teaching for quality and equity: (Re)focusing the lens to make diversity and difference visible. In R. Henderson (Ed.), *Teaching literacies in the middle years: Pedagogies and diversity* (pp. 113–131). South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press.
- Kingsley, P. (2015, December 22). Over a million migrants and refugees have reached this year, says IOM. *theguardian* (Online news). Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/22/one-million-migrants-and-refugees-have-reached-europe-this-year-iom>
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maxwell, J. A., & Miller, B. A. (2008). Categorizing and connecting strategies in qualitative data analysis. In P. Leavy, & S. Hesse-Biber (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 461–477). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- McAllister, J. (2002). *Paid agricultural workers: A workforce of the fringe*. Paper presented at the The Asia Pacific Sociological Association Conference, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland, July 4–7.
- Miller, B. A. (1993). Rural distress and survival: The school and the importance of “community”. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 9(2), 84–103.
- Murrow, E. R. (Broadcast Journalist). (1960). *Harvest of shame* (CBS documentary). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJTVF_dya7E
- Remy Leder, J. (2009). Conclusion: Whither changing schools? In P. A. Danaher, M. Kenny, & J. Remy Leder (Eds.), *Traveller, nomadic and migrant education* (pp. 214–220). New York, NY: Routledge.
- State Department of Education, Idaho. (2009). *Migrant Education Program history* (Youtube). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DckPww8V-Ck>

- U.S. Department of Education. (2016a). Programs and grants – OME. Retrieved from <https://ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/ome/programs.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2016). Programs: Migrant Education – Basic state formula grants. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/mep/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Migrant Education Even Start. Archived information. Retrieved from <https://ed.gov/programs/mees/index.html>
- Whitehouse, M., & Colvin, C. (2001). “Reading” families: Deficit discourse and family literacy. *Theory into Practice*, 40(3), 212–219.