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Rethinking Deficit Discourses in Education Through Rural Education Research and the Concept of Querencia

Judith A. Gouwens

Roosevelt University

jgouwens@roosevelt.edu

Robyn Henderson

University of Southern Queensland

robyn.henderson@usq.edu.au

Abstract

This paper uses data from research projects that deliberately set out to tell positive stories about educators who were working with the children and families of migratory agricultural workers in the US. The aim underpinning these projects was to move beyond the deficit discourses and stories of blame that so often circulate, particularly in relation to social groups that are marginalised, and to present stories that embody positive and productive ways of thinking and working. Using Maxwell's (2012) process of connecting, the authors used the transcripts of semi-structured interviews to construct narratives about three of the educators who were interviewed. These examples from rural education research highlighted the actions of educators to build and promote children's and families' relationships with the place where they were residing temporarily. The notion of *querencia* provided a helpful way of conceptualising the relationship between place and belonging, to assist the development of insider understandings. The narrative approach offers a way of opening such discussions in education more broadly and to consider the role of teachers in ensuring that negatively framed stories, such as deficit discourses, are not in play.

Keywords: *deficit discourses, migrant education, mobility, narrative, querencia, rural education research*

Introduction

A mantra of education in recent times has been that schools need to be inclusive, to welcome all students and to provide access and resources for those who are marginalised or excluded in some settings. Despite the push to provide equitable educational opportunities, deficit discourses or stories of blame still circulate in relation to particular groups of students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia (Hogarth, 2017), children and families who live in poverty (Woods, 2021; Warren et al., 2016), and students who have English as an additional language (Alford & Woods, 2017). Indeed, over many years as researchers, we have recorded and analysed deficit discourses that have surfaced in our investigations of the lived experiences of agricultural worker families in Australia and the US and the education on offer for the children of those families (e.g., Gouwens, 2001; Gouwens & Henderson, 2017; Henderson, 2008a, 2017; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013).

Many agricultural workers are migrant (migratory) families, who move from place to place as they follow harvesting seasons during the year. Sometimes, though, they settle in a particular location for a length of time. In both cases – whether seen as migratory and therefore transient members of particular communities, or seen as families who have settled perhaps temporarily in particular communities – they are often perceived as outsiders, and exclusion is part of their experiences of these communities (Gouwens, 2021; Henderson, 2017; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013).

Over a long period of time, our research – conducted individually as well as jointly in the US and in Australia – has focused on migratory agricultural workers and their children as an identifiable social group from rural areas and with specific educational needs relating to their movement across locations. Our thinking has been that it is important to move beyond the deficit discourses and stories of blame that have been shown by our research as so often circulating in communities. Instead, our approach has become one of finding examples of positive experiences, of inclusion, that provide the educational community with stories of success and evidence contrary to the dominant discourses.

Our argument, then, is that finding positive stories of teachers and making them visible to a wider audience is a way of helping teachers become aware of ways of making a difference for children who traditionally have not been particularly successful in school settings. In this article, we draw on three research projects, where we interviewed facilitators of a family literacy program and teachers in a range of rural areas of the US. The educators were fully committed to education for the children of migratory agricultural workers, to the children they taught and to the children’s families, often for many years after the children had left their classes.

We begin this paper by discussing a brief selection of literature that relates to research that has explored ways of moving beyond deficit discourses. We then discuss the methodology used for the research presented and we explain the Spanish term *querencia*, which we have used to make sense of educators’ attempts to build spaces where families feel safe and experience a sense of belonging and inclusion. After this we present a selection of stories from some of the educators who were committed to enabling the children and families of migratory agricultural workers to succeed in new communities and schools. We conclude with a consideration of the strategies that were learnt from the stories in rural spaces and what this research offers for research in other locations, including the urban.

Moving Beyond Deficit Discourses

There is an abundance of research that has explored the way marginalised social groups have been described in deficit terms and an abundance of research that has tried to move beyond deficit views. Two decades ago, the second author learnt from her doctoral research that deficit stories seemed to represent common-sense ways of making sense of the underachievement of farm workers’ children in the learning of literacies. Although she has written about those deficit stories on many occasions (e.g., Henderson, 2001, 2008a, 2021), she always highlights the insights that Shirley Brice Heath (1983) had offered in the 1980s about student diversity and how it is understood. Heath highlighted that the transition from home into school is not a similar process for all students, because some students have had many years of experience, at home, with the “ways with words” (from the title of Heath’s book) of school.

Deficit discourses, it seems, often come from an expectation that schooling is the same for all students. Yet, Heath (1983) had shown how students can bring different experiences and world views to school and this may help or hinder their take-up of school practices and behaviours. Therefore, if teachers assume that students who are not successful in the school context are not good learners or come from what might be described as bad homes, it appears that they are

unable to see that the students might bring strengths and knowledges to school, just not the strengths and knowledges that are validated in school settings.

Indeed, some research has deliberately set out to change such taken-for-granted views. Kamler and Comber (2005), for example, conducted a three-year project in two Australian states, whereby they “*created a new lens for teachers to view children and parents outside deficit discourses*” (p. 4). This research involved pairs of early and late career teachers conducting case studies on at-risk students, “*documenting what it was children could do, as well as what they could not do*” (p. 4), and looking for “*evidence of children’s capacities, interests, strengths and cultural investments*” (p. 6). Kamler and Comber were surprised at how quickly the teachers could make a difference to students’ learning and they used a “*turning around*” metaphor (p. 7) to describe the teachers’ moves to reconnect students to learning.

Similarly, the work of Moll and colleagues (see González et al., 2005) in the US has turned teachers’ focus to students’ strengths, rather than their weaknesses. They argued for regarding all people, including children, as competent and bringing life experiences and knowledge to what they do, including their learning. Beginning in the early 1990s, they began a project that used a “*funds of knowledge approach*” (p. 5), encouraging teachers to see themselves as learners, to learn about the everyday lives of their students, and then to rethink their classroom practices in light of that learning. Such practice, of course, is about turning teachers’ gaze to strengths, rather than deficits.

Woods (2019), in Australia, conducted research in a high poverty school with significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from South Pacific Island cultural backgrounds. Conducted in partnership with school personnel, the research aimed to reform school practices. It was noted that previously the teachers had regarded “*the children in their classrooms as needing to learn about school knowledge and practices – and they worked hard to do this*” (p. 220). This view, however, had limited the teachers’ abilities to see the strengths of the children, their families and their communities, and therefore it limited their ways of teaching. These observations from Woods’ research (see also Alford & Woods, 2017) aligned with that of Gutiérrez et al. (2009), who argued that it is important to find ways to oppose “*the default scripts of risk, difference, and deficiency – approaches that systematically fail to remediate educational activities that make teachers and students active agents in learning processes*” (p. 238).

Across multiple educational contexts, other research has also looked at interventions and various ways of removing or erasing deficits (e.g., Connor & Gabel, 2013; Hogarth, 2017; Warren et al., 2016). The second author of this paper, for example, conducted a series of research projects in rural schools, that had a reputation for catering well for students who were mobile (see Henderson, 2015, 2017; Butt et al., 2016). All of the schools were located in rural areas in Queensland, Australia. In these particular schools, deficit discourses were not evident. Rather, school staff were focused on helping students achieve educational success.

One of Henderson’s (2017) projects was conducted in a school where families and students were mobile for many reasons. Some families were mobile for occupational reasons, including farm work; some moved because the parents were exercising their right to choose the school that their children attended; some families had relocated to find affordable housing; 17% of the school’s students identified as Indigenous and that group was identified as highly mobile by the principal. This particular research project demonstrated that the school’s overall plan was to ensure that children and their families who were new to the locality felt welcome in the school. This was clearly a plan shared by the whole school staff, with all school personnel aiming to build a sense of belonging for new students, as a way of helping students to settle socially and to achieve academic success. The observations and interviews that Henderson conducted, however, did not tap into evidence of how teachers were engaging mobile students pedagogically, even though Henderson herself was of the opinion that pedagogy could play a key part in catering for

student diversity, including the diverse home experiences of mobile students (Henderson, 2008b).

Another of Henderson's projects (see Henderson, 2015; Butt et al., 2016), conducted in a school in a different rural area, was designed to focus specifically on the pedagogical work that teachers used when teaching mobile students. The aim of the research was to identify "*what teachers 'do' when they have new students in their classrooms,*" how they engage these students in learning, and how they see this teaching in pedagogical terms (Henderson, 2015, p. ii). What Henderson found was that teachers did not talk about their pedagogical approaches and, at times, they struggled to even explain the strategies that they used to cater for children who had come from another school and were new in their classrooms. Over time, however, through discussing and comparing teaching ideas with the group of teachers involved in the project, the teachers developed four clusters of strategies, based on their practices, that addressed how they created a welcoming environment, how they established initial social support, how they checked where new students' learning was at, and how they engaged students in learning (Butt et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, despite the long list of strategies and classroom practices, talk about pedagogies remained elusive. Overall, the research to date suggests that there is probably a lot more to learn about what characterises effective education for students who are migratory or experience educational mobility at some time during their schooling, and how and why particular strategies and practices work.

Constructing and Framing the Study

The research reported in this paper has been based on three research projects that we have undertaken in rural areas of the US. Initially the focus was the US Midwest, but in later projects we had the opportunity to collect data from teachers and educational personnel in other rural locations. As already explained, we have been very keen to identify positive stories about working with migratory agricultural worker families and our research projects were designed to build on the work previously conducted, including the projects by Butt et al. (2016) and Henderson (2008b, 2015, 2017).

The research participants were teachers and other educational workers from Illinois, Wisconsin, Florida and California. All of them had long-term experience in and commitment to the Migrant Education Program, which is a US Department of Education program providing leadership, technical and financial support to "*migrant children, youth, agricultural workers, fishers, and their families*" (US Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021b). The program has a clear aim: "*to ensure that all migratory children reach challenging academic standards and graduate with a high school diploma ... that prepares them for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment*" (US Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021a). Many of the teachers who participated in the research worked in the summer program, which provides opportunities for migratory children to continue their formal education during summer vacations.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the research participants (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Although the interview process began with a list of potential questions, the semi-structured format provided the flexibility for us, as interviewers, to hear about issues and information that we had not expected (Barbour & Schostak, 2005) and to ask further questions about the everyday stories in which this information was embedded (McAlpine, 2016). As McAlpine (2016) emphasised, "*we all tell stories about our lives every day since narrative provides a practical means for a person to construct a coherent plot about his/her life with a beginning, middle, end – a past, present and future*" (p. 33).

McAlpine's (2016) framing of narrative as an "*everyday activity*" (p. 34) informed the data analysis. By using this notion in conjunction with Maxwell's (2012) process of "*connecting*" and

finding pieces of data to tell a coherent story, we were able to construct a narrative about each of the research participants. According to Maxwell, this process addresses the limitations of the analytical process of categorising data, which involves “*fracturing the initial text into discrete segments and resorting it into categories*” (p. 112). Instead, the process of connecting enables researchers to “*look for relationships that connect statements and events within a context into a coherent whole*” (p. 113). The outcomes of that process resulted in the narratives we present in this paper.

After conducting the interviews, we realised that many of the research participants’ stories focused on their attempts to build spaces where families felt safe and experienced a sense of belonging and inclusion. This enabled us to think conceptually in terms of the relationships between the physical place of the community, the spaces that teachers built to assist families, and *querencia*. The Spanish term *querencia* came to our attention initially in 2017, from a visit by one of the authors to the art museum at the University of Wyoming. One of the exhibitions, called *Following the Manito trail*, presented an interdisciplinary ethnography of migration from Mexico to the US, using photographs, oral history and artefacts, and it used the term *querencia*.

The use of *querencia* in that exhibition sparked an investigation into whether it was an appropriate word for our project, while remembering of course that neither of the authors speak Spanish. The term represents how “*feelings and deepest beliefs attach the self to place*” (Ault, 2008, p. 605) and has been used in a range of contexts, including sustainability (e.g., Arellano, 2014; Fisher, 2008; Gradle, 2007; Huddleston, 2015). Lopez (1990) provided insights into the term’s origins, explaining that it comes from the verb *querer*, which means to desire, and reporting it as a term used in Spain “*to describe the spot in a bullring where a wounded bull goes to gather himself, the place he returns to after his painful encounters with the picadors and the banderilleros*” (p. 23). Lopez went on to clarify that, in its broader use, the term “*refers to a place on the ground where one feels secure, a place from which one’s strength of character is drawn*” (p. 23).

Our decision to use the term *querencia* as a concept in our research meant that we also tapped into the body of research that considers place (e.g., Gieryn, 2000; Gruenewald, 2003; Massey, 2005) and the relationship between place, exclusion and marginalisation (e.g., Dunne et al., 2018). To borrow a term from Massey (2005), we recognised that many social groups experience a *throwtogetherness* when joining new communities and that this relates at times to migratory agricultural workers and their families as they move into new locations and new communities.

Indeed, research has provided evidence that place-consciousness is an important aspect of education (Gruenewald, 2003) and that place-based education can make a difference to student learning (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Comber et al., 2007). Yet, for families who are new to a location, there would seem to be a gap between being in a new place and knowing that place. For families to feel a sense of belonging to a new place, interpersonal relationships have been found to be important (Stephenson & Källström, 2020). Our consideration of place will inform some of our concluding comments.

Here we share three of the constructed narratives about the interviewees’ work with migrant children and their families. The stories reflect the commitment of the educators to include migratory children and their families in their educational processes and in the institutions and larger communities in which they find themselves.

Narrative 1: Migrant Interventionist

Ms D. is an educator in Florida. Her official title has evolved to “*migrant interventionist*” which she says means being a “*squeaky wheel*,” advocating for migrant children in grades 6 through 12. She works through the guidance program in a school district that serves a largely rural population. This includes a large number of children whose families travel for work as they follow

the crops north in the summer and back south to Florida in the fall. She has been involved in several positions in the migrant education program since 2005. While many migrant programs throughout the US operate mainly in the summer, the program in Ms D.'s school district operates mainly during the regular school year.

She describes much of her work as building relationships—with children and youth, with their families, with teachers and administrators in her school district, and even with the larger community on behalf of the children and their families. According to Ms D., *“Building relationships is really important, both with students and the parents, and with the Hispanic parents, there’s a sense of respect ... They respect what I say, I respect what they say, I listen to what they want.”* She has worked at building relationships in a variety of ways.

When she began working with migrant families, Ms D. decided that she needed to understand the work that the parents and older children and youth do: *“I wanted to see and experience what they did, [and I] actually went for one week, to [pick] strawberries, just to see what it was like.”* She said it was *“horrible, horrible! ... I was bending the whole day.”* She continued:

What was so interesting to me in the field ... the ladies that were actually picking in our rows were talking back and forth to each other. I couldn’t even breathe; I was trying just to keep up. [The ladies] were doing it really fast, and just the comradery in the field—I was just very impressed by that, because I was miserable ... This is the worst job you could have, and they did it without that kind of attitude.

Ms D. said she was very impressed, gaining an understanding of just how hard the pickers worked and how they seemed to enjoy being together. Besides understanding how physically taxing picking strawberries is, Ms D. also realised that day how little migrant workers earn for their work. She said:

Every row you [pick], they give you a little coin, and at the end of the day, that’s how you would get paid. I had all my coins, which were way less than everybody else. ... I gave them to one of the ladies, and I think that really meant something to her. ... She saw me struggling the entire day ... It was hard for me to grasp the fact that somebody would work that hard for that little.

Picking strawberries helped Ms D. to gain knowledge and experience upon which she could build relationships with her students and their parents who were also picking. She indicated that she believed that relationships are built on respect. She said, *“It is often a matter of listening”*:

I was talking to some ladies just casually, and I said, “Well, when your daughter goes to college, she could be a nurse.” She was a ... third grader, and the ladies started laughing. [I asked] what was going on, [and] they said, “Our daughters aren’t going to college, they’re going to get married and have families, and they probably won’t be in school after [age] 15.” In their culture and their state in Mexico, it’s very common for a 15-year-old girl to leave [school] after her Quinceanera [15th birthday celebration to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood] and get married because she was a woman then, and then she can start her family.

According to Ms D., to have a relationship with families depends on her understanding the cultural background of the families. At the same time, Ms D. works to help parents understand the cultural expectations of the school and the community. She said, *“Part of the problem with the ... migrant families that I work with is that they are uninformed. I try to make it a point to always inform parents.”* She texts them and they will call her if they do not understand. She also depends on other parents to communicate with parents newer to the community. She explained that *“If you can get that one lady to be on your side ... it’s different coming from her.”* While she

works to communicate with families, she also helps to build community among the migrant families.

Although Ms D.'s work assignment is with children in grades 6 through 12, she often helps to enrol younger children in school and to communicate with their parents. She recounted a time when she made a visit to the family of a second grade child who was supposed to go on a field trip. The father had not returned the permission slip for the child to attend.

I tried to text him, but I couldn't get him. It was nine o'clock at night, the night before the field trip, so I [went] over to his house to get the form. He was very grateful ... and he said I really want some of your advice.

In this case, communication was a challenge because the family was from Guatemala, and they only understood a little Spanish. She explained:

The Guatemalan families have been less forthcoming and more guarded. ... It's been a harder population for me to build a relationship with. I'm very proud of myself for being able to do it, because at first, it was like I couldn't get them to open the door. ... Now they all run out and ask me for everything.

Making such a home visit underscores the value of such contacts to relationship building. Ms D. said, "We are so important. ... It takes a little bit more. If you don't do the little bit more, [the child] wouldn't have gone [on the field trip]."

Ms D. communicates high expectations for her students to be successful, go on to some kind of post-secondary education, and build a community among themselves. While she mentors students, she encourages them to mentor one another. But she says that it is often the little things that make the most difference for migrant students. She recounted:

One of my seniors this year wrote an essay in her AP [Advanced Placement] English class, and [her English] teacher ... said, "I really want you to read this. It's about an incident that changed her life forever." She wrote about me buying her lunch and bringing it to the school. It was in the [girl's] eighth grade year ... It was her birthday, and nobody had remembered her birthday. I didn't know it at the time. I bought her a frappe and her favourite things from McDonald's.

She said it was a very difficult day for her ... and she talked about being depressed. Then this teacher came in and did this. ... I don't even remember it being an emotional thing, and I didn't know what she was going through.

Ms D. said that sometimes you do not even realise that something so small can make such a big difference. The families are "so grateful for everything that you put in. I'm thinking, that's my job, that was an easy thing for me to do."

Over the time Ms D. has worked with migrant children and their families, she says that she has "become very passionate about it. ... I just can't get out of it. I just love it. ... I always tell the students I really have the best job!" While Ms D. loves her job and is just doing what she believes is best and right for the children and their families, she is helping them to feel as if they belong, as if they are at home while they are in their "part-time" community. She works to build *querencia*.

Narrative 2: Family Support Professional

Like Ms D., Ms G. has worked in the migrant education program in the US for many years. She works, however, on the other side of the country in California, with pre-school children in a school readiness program. Ms G., who was recognised in 2019 by the National Association of State Directors of Migrant Education in the US for the quality of her teaching, is herself an immigrant from India.

Ms G. works in a community of migrants mainly from the state of Punjab in India. These farmworkers plant and pick strawberries, prune trees and pick peaches, prunes, almonds, walnuts, and other kinds of produce in California. Many of them also travel to Oregon to pick cherries and other fruit there.

When she was first a part of the migrant education program, Ms G. worked only in the summer program, but after two summers, she was hired to work fulltime and year-round. Her main teaching responsibility is to help three-year-olds be ready to enter pre-school at age four. Ms G. regularly visits the children at home, teaching them to recognise alphabet letters, numbers, shapes, and colours. At the same time, she helps parents understand what the pre-school and kindergarten expect of children when they enter.

According to Ms G., each of the children and families she works with stand out as distinctive, but there are always some who are special to her. *“I actually have a family,”* she said,

where I had taught the little one, the little girl. That mother is still in touch with me. Her kids have gone off to college. She called me when they were in high school [to ask] what do you think I should do? How do you think I should do this? You know, for everything, and whenever I see her number [on my caller ID] I just know ... she always says, you must think I only call you when I need something. Her son is engaged to be married now. [That] just tells me how long I’ve been doing this.

She becomes part of each family, and she explains that she goes into their homes for almost a full year.

I start with them in September, and I go all the way ’til the end of May. So they get to trust you. They get to know you. You get to know them, and sometimes we’ll have little mother-in-law, daughter-in-law things going on. If the daughter-in-law is not there, the mother-in-law is going to come to me and say “this, this, or this” you know, and if the mother-in-law is not there, the daughter-in-law is going to come and tell me ... So I have to kind of keep my peace with ... So there’s all kinds of things that happen on this job.

Although Ms G.’s work is with the children, she educates the parents about school expectations for the children and for the parents, as well, and she often attends conferences along with the parents once the children are in pre-school and beyond, to translate and to ensure that parents understand what teachers tell them about their children. She said:

I always encourage my moms, especially the ones who are new [to the US] and they are struggling with the language. ... They are going to have to go to the school. They are going to have to talk to the teachers, so I will encourage them. Take the class where at least your spoken language gets a little easier, to where you can understand them, they can understand you, at least you can communicate. I say we are there to help them translate and all that, but we are not there all the time. So sometimes you might just have to go on your own. So at least learn that much, and the majority of them do.

The parents Ms G. works with often do follow her encouragement. She said, *“I actually have a very good example.”*

I had a mom who was, when she came [to the US], was just taking regular classes just to learn the language, and then she took up a radiology class. She has become an MRI tech. ... I had to go in for an MRI, and she is the one who did my MRI. I didn’t recognise her right away, because you know I mostly remember the kids, and she, after she did my MRI, comes out and she goes, “Do you know you used to come and teach my child?” I was like, “I am so happy for you that you did something with your life, and you’ve become a technician.”

When parents go to school, Ms G. says, they become examples for their kids: “If they have striven to do something for themselves, the kids see that [the parents] have made something of themselves so that they want to do something with their lives too.”

According to Ms G., the families she works with have very high expectations for their children to succeed academically, and most of the children will become professionals. If the children do follow their parents into farm work, it is likely that “*the dad who has worked all his life has probably bought some land for the son ... where he can farm his own land, rather than work for someone.*” For the Punjabi families that Ms G. works with, she becomes the link to their new community, the facilitator of *querencia*. She helps them not only find a space and place of belonging in that new community, but also to grow and thrive in it.

Narrative 3: Migrant Education Teacher and Consultant

Ms C. was a teacher for more than 30 years in the small US Midwest town where she has lived all her life. Migrant farm workers typically began to arrive in her little town in April, where some of them worked on farms, planting and picking tomatoes, beans, and other produce and detasseling corn. Many of them also worked in canning plants where the produce was canned. The majority of the migrant farm workers travelled between her little town and their home bases in Texas. The migrant families usually stayed in the area for about nine weeks into the fall school term.

Ms C. recalls not having been aware of migrant farmworkers in her community until she began working with their children in the migrant education program. She was surprised to find out, when she asked her mother, that her own father had hired migrant farmworkers to “*walk the beans,*” hoeing the weeds between the rows of beans on their farm. “*Walking the beans*” was a job she and her brothers had when they were old enough to do so, instead of migrant farmworkers. But interestingly, even in Ms C.’s small town and surrounding area, the migrant farmworkers were, for the most part, invisible to the general public.

When Ms C. began working in the summer, the migrant education program was a way to make some extra money, “but that quickly changed so that just working with the kids became something you look forward to every year. It changed from that money aspect to the caring, wanting to be involved in what was going on with them.” According to Ms C., the migrant children “wanted to learn and they wanted to have fun.”

Ms C. looked forward to seeing the children year after year in the summer program. She often had children three or four years in a row, and she said, “*You got to see them grow from year to year. I’ve seen ... kids start real little and go all the way through high school and how they grow and change.*” Teacher assistants in her program helped to provide continuity for the children because they regularly travelled with the migrant families from “*the valley*” [the Rio Grande Valley] in Texas. They knew the children and their families, and the families and children felt comfortable with the teacher assistants who facilitated their entry into the new school and their relationships with the teachers.

As Ms D. had said, it is often the small things that make a difference to children. In Ms C.’s small town, children historically had learned to fish in the lagoon in the town park. Ms C. and her husband took the children she taught each summer to the small park to teach them to fish. It was a small thing, but clearly a symbol of belonging in the community. As Ms C.’s own sons grew older, they joined in helping migrant children learn to fish in the lagoon.

It was not only the children that Ms C. initiated into the community through the park. She regularly held “*family nights*” for the migrant families. Ms C. and her husband operated a miniature golf business in the park, and family nights included playing mini-golf, fishing, and eating ice cream sundaes.

In her gentle, kind and quiet way, Ms C. helped children to feel that they belonged and could experience *querencia*. One year, there was a young child in the program who was a biter. He took out his fear and frustration, possibly the result of the trauma of moving to a new community, by biting the adults who were working with him. Ms C. was able to build a relationship with him that kept him from biting. She described taking the child on a field trip to a zoo, and on the bus on the return trip, he snuggled against her and went to sleep. She continued to work with the child for at least two more years, developing a positive relationship with him.

In the state where Ms C. lives, the number of migrant workers has decreased steadily because of canning plant closings, mechanisation of the farm work, and fear among migrant workers of being harassed or even deported by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service. At one time, the summer migrant education program in her school district was one of the first programs in her state, and one of the largest, serving around 400 children—an entire “schoolful” of children. Ms C. says that in those years, she taught classes of more than 25 children in the summer. In the last three or four years that she taught in the summer, there were only a handful of children in the program. Ms C. met with them individually or with two children at a time, either at their homes, at the town park, or in the basement of a church.

Ms C. recalled enjoying working with children individually, describing her work with Juan:

We sat on the picnic table. We never did go in the house with Juan. Thank goodness it never rained any day of the week we were there. But he'd come running out and I'd get the iPad out because he was still learning English words and English sounds and the alphabet because he didn't know the alphabet in English. His family was migrating between [our town] and Mexico ... he was just so excited.

When Ms C. arrived, Juan would run out of the house, shouting, “Maestra [teacher, a title of respect], maestra, maestra!”

Although Ms C. retired a few years ago from the regular classroom position that she held, she continues to work in the summer migrant education program. Currently, she serves as a consultant for the summer migrant education program in her state, visiting program sites in other towns to coach and support teachers. According to her, though, it is not the same as having “her own kids” to work with for the summer.

Summary and Conclusion

The narratives of Ms D., Ms G. and Ms C. represent the many stories we have heard from educators who work with migrant/migratory children and their families. In our interviews with educators, we noted the passion and enthusiasm they have and their empathy for understanding the children and their families and helping them to become part of new communities. We also noted the many, many ways that these educators went far beyond their formal job descriptions to find ways to include and support migratory children and their families.

The three narratives demonstrate the importance that the educators gave to assisting families to feel safe and at home in their new locations. In doing this, the educators were enabling families to develop knowledge of place that would help to facilitate the process of moving from outsider to insider. According to Gieryn (2000), place is “filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations” (p. 465), the types of attributes that the educators were helping the families to understand. In effect, the educators were lessening the effects of the *throwntogetherness* (Massey, 2005) that can occur when migratory families move into new communities. *Querencia* was a useful term to conceptualise the importance of the educators’ actions to build and promote belonging to place, with associated understandings of the practices and people of that place.

A form of place-based education (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Comber et al., 2007; Gruenewald, 2003) seemed to be in play, although *place-consciousness* and *place-based education* were not terms that the educators used. Indeed, one of the strategies used by the educators was to help the migrant families connect to their new community and build relationships there. These were of different types: building relationships with particular locations; helping families to know the practices or how things were done in the community; helping them experience and learn some of the practices and routines of the community; and introducing them to people within the community, with ways of communicating with them. All three narratives emphasised the importance of building relationships, as has been identified in previous research (e.g., Stephenson & Källström, 2020). In particular, the educators' actions were aimed at building positive experiences for the migrant children and their families. However, these were not intended to be short term moves, but the families were being assisted to build and develop ongoing and lasting connections with the community.

The three educators whose narratives we included here built relationships in a variety of ways, and for each of them, the strategies they used were appropriate to their own contexts. The cultural contexts of their schools and communities differed, the ages of the children they served differed, and the personalities of the educators themselves differed. As a result, the practices they engaged in differed. In the end, though, all three of them were committed to building relationships with children and their families that facilitated *querencia*.

What was evident in the educators' narratives was that the notion of place had multiple roles in helping children and their families. On the one hand, the educators were sharing the cultural capital of the new place with families and children. In this way, they were providing opportunities for the families to gain general knowledge of their new communities and to build cultural knowledge of the education community and the school. On the other hand, the educators were learning about the diversity of families while beginning to understand what assumptions were taken-for-granted in their own communities.

In fact, the educators' narratives were overwhelmingly positive, both about their own experiences and also about the children and families, in a time when so much of the discourse about educators and education, particularly that which is circulated by the media, is negative. All of the educators would indicate their agreement with the explicit statements of several of them that they themselves were the beneficiaries of the relationships with the children and the families.

In effect, these positive stories provide useful evidence for what might be done to achieve educational parity of agricultural workers' children with other groups within schools and educational systems. There is plenty of evidence that suggests that some groups are privileged within the school system. This is because they have historically been a part of the physical community of the school, they are part of the culture of that community, and the school reflects the culture and the cultural knowledge of the community. When educators such as those whose stories are told here explicitly work to include children, they begin to break down the negative effects of that privilege.

Our research, presented here in the form of three narratives, is firmly situated in the field of rural education research. It is located in rural areas and focuses on education for the children of agricultural workers whose work lives are part of the fabric of rural America. In addition, the concept of place was a unifying theme in the interviews that we conducted and the stories the educators told of their work with these children. The narratives provide specific evidence of educators being successful in situations where deficit discourses could have prevailed.

Our research and the way it was conducted, however, have relevance far beyond rural contexts of the US where the research was undertaken. Indeed, there is certainly plenty of evidence of social groups being framed negatively and regarded as deficient or described in discriminatory

and stereotypical terms in many locations, not just the rural. Positive stories about what educators might do can provide food for thought for rethinking assumptions about students who are disengaged, regardless of the location. The educators we interviewed indicated that simple actions, which sometimes seemed non-academic, helped to build relationships, which in turn enabled those new to the community to know the place and its people.

The stories of the educators we included here represent a positive view of mobile families and their children, and their discourse includes such practices as building a space for talk; negotiating community space; rethinking cultural space; sharing space/s; dealing with new space/s – to show how rural education research can open up discussions in education research more broadly. The challenge for researchers everywhere is to consider how positive stories like these might be collected in diverse locations, including the urban, and then how they might be used to start discussions about breaking the insidious effects of deficit discourses about marginalised groups.

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