



TEACHERS AS FIRST RESPONDERS

What Teachers Do to Help Migrant Children and Their Families Deal with the Trauma They Experience

JUDITH GOUWENS

Roosevelt University, USA

KEYWORDS

Migrant
Refugee
Toxic trauma
Toxic stress
Teacher stories
Narrative research

ABSTRACT

While there is much in the press about refugee and migrant children's movements around the world and their status in the countries where they ultimately (or even temporarily) settle, how these children experience schooling and education is critical in mitigating the effects of the trauma they experience in their home countries, in the process of leaving their home communities or countries, in traveling to their new communities and countries and getting settled in those new communities and countries. This paper presents the stories of three teachers who work with migrant children in the United States Midwest. Interviews with these teachers show that they actively work to mitigate the trauma the migrant children have experienced by creating classrooms that welcome the children and their families, help them to have a sense of belonging in their schools and communities, and help the children develop feelings of confidence and competence, critical to overcoming toxic stress.

Received: 08/ 01/ 2021

Accepted: 10/ 01 / 2021

1. Introduction

While there is much in the press about refugee and migrant children's movements around the world and their status in the countries where they ultimately (or even temporarily) settle, how these children experience schooling and education is critical in mitigating the effects of the trauma they experience in their home countries, in the process of leaving their home countries, in traveling to their new countries, and getting settled in those new countries.

The United Nations Refugee Agency, the UNHCR, estimates that about 1 % of the world's population have "fled their homes" and they put the number at about 26 million refugees, the highest number ever seen, around the world. About half of those are children under the age of 18 (unhcr.org). The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated in 2018 that there were 258 million international migrants, with migrant workers comprising 4.7 % of the global labor force

In the United States alone, estimates of the number of migrant workers range from 1 to 5 million, with no clear statistics because as many as 52 % of migrant workers are unauthorized or undocumented, and thus, not counted, according to a 2020 report by Gonzalez. Still, migrant workers in the US make up a large percentage of workers in agriculture, fisheries, and meatpacking. Young children and youth often accompany their parents or other relatives as they migrate for work around the US, and there are also many "out of school" youth who travel for work unaccompanied by parents.

In the US, the negative effects of being a migrant on children's educations have been recognized for more than 60 years. In 1966, the US Congress established a migrant education program to address those negative effects (US Department of Education). There are some school-year migrant education programs where there are migrant agricultural workers year-round, but there are also many summer programs intended to address the discontinuity that children experience as they move from state to state and school to school, traveling with their migrant worker parents, or out of school youth

traveling on their own, following growing seasons and the crops around the US.

Education in the US is the responsibility of the states, not the federal government, and there is no national curriculum. Even more troubling for migrant children is that the curriculum varies from school to school, even within states. Being mobile, as migrant children and youth are, results in gaps in their learning, and in earning the credits necessary for completing school successfully.

Filling the educational gaps is important, but educators, psychologists, and other social scientists have also recognized that the trauma that refugee and migrant children experience may have even more detrimental effects on those children in the long term, leading to such adult health problems as heart disease, cancer, asthma, and depression, as well as problems with adult functioning.

2. Traumatic Stress

A large-scale study of the trauma experienced by children, The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study or ACES, began between 1995 and 1997 and continues to follow participants as it documents the effects of adverse events and experiences that study participants experienced as children. Certainly, refugee and migrant children have experienced high numbers of adverse childhood events, and thus what the ACE study describes as toxic trauma, the effects of which can last for many years after the actual experiences or events. The study identified a series of categories of adverse childhood experiences and events, which include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect; and household dysfunction such as mental illness, mother treated violently, divorce, incarcerated relative, and substance abuse.

Subsequent study reported by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network also categories such as witnessing, being a victim of, and/or perpetrating violence; war; lack of food, water, and shelter; physical injuries and infections; torture; forced labor; harassment; detention; and separation from parents and other family members; displacement from homes; transportation difficulties; loss of community;

cultural conflict between children and parents; problems trying to fit in at a new school; loneliness and loss of a social support network and social status; all of which can result in toxic stress or trauma.

The Center for Child Stress and Health, with Dr. Javier Rosales, Clinical Director, was established by the medical school of Florida State University to help clinicians, parents, educators, and children themselves address the effects of trauma that is the result of adverse childhood experiences. The work of the Center is focused primarily in the rural and poor communities in Florida with much of that work directed at mitigating the toxic stressors experienced by children of the large population of migrant farmworkers there. Rosales argues that “a parent is the number one shield against the effects of childhood toxic stress,” (Rosales, nd) but he also acknowledges the critical role that educators can play in mitigating toxic stress in children.

3. Teachers Who are First Responders

Since 2014, we have been interviewing educators in the US who work in migrant education programs. Our goal has been to hear the stories about the work of migrant educators and to retell the stories to give voice to those educators whom we consider to be “first responders,” doing work that supports migrant children academically, psychologically, and emotionally, and helps to mitigate the effects of the trauma that they experience. We aim to respond to the call of Steve Zemelman of the Illinois Writing Project (2020) when he argues that teachers “need a wider sharing with the public about effective classrooms where teachers are creative and inspiring and where kids are engaged and learning in-depth.” We also believe that it is important for the stories of teachers whose practice works to mitigate trauma to be heard.

Our research is narrative and based on storytelling. We analyze the transcripts of the interviews through constant comparison to identify themes and details (Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008), and then we construct stories about the teachers’ work using Maxwell’s approach to analysis (2005), which involves connecting the pieces and details together into coherent narratives or stories. According to Jerome Bruner, “Our lives with stories start early

and go on ceaselessly” (2002, p. 3). Bruner said humans are “storytelling creatures” who make sense of the world through telling stories. Stories serve many purposes, among them helping us to remember information. He said that “perhaps the most basic thing that can be said about human memory . . . is that unless a detail is placed into a structured pattern, it is rapidly forgotten” (1961, p. 24). Story can become the vehicle for such structured pattern, and thus our narrative research puts the details of the work of teachers of migrant children and youth into the form of stories that keep those details from being forgotten.

As we have listened to educators talk about their work with migrant children and youth, we have noted that the stories the teachers tell about their work align with some of what the National Child Traumatic Stress Network lists as characteristics of trauma-informed education. In particular, these educators create environments that are safe and provide the security that children and their families who have experienced trauma need to be able to gain confidence, competence, and a sense of belonging in their new communities.

What follows are the stories of three teachers that we have interviewed. The quotations in the stories are drawn from personal interviews of the three teachers conducted in 2015.

3.1. *“Working with migrant children is not a job. It’s a calling.”*

Ms. P. has worked for about 15 years in a summer migrant education program in the small town where she lives and teaches during the regular school year. During those 15 years, she has been a teacher, a teacher coach, and the migrant education program administrator. Ms. P. told us that she has worked in the migrant education program because of

knowing that you are catching some kids up that have missed some schooling or knowing that you are pushing [kids] to do what you know they can do, or are not real sure of themselves, giving them confidence. . . it’s the kids for why I am doing it, it’s the kids.

But it's not just the kids who need confidence and welcoming. It's their parents, as well. At our interview, Ms. P. recalled,

This past week, there was a new African family, I am pretty sure from the Congo. I saw a man walking and then I could see a lady and three small children, and this was their first school experience and so they were getting their picture taken. The next day they were waiting outside the school because it wasn't quite time [to go in] and so I said, 'Bonjour' because I know that is the appropriate greeting. I made a comment in English about his children and he said, 'Thank you.' Then I saw him several other mornings and we exchanged our greeting. I know that it is a very small thing, but to him, I'm the school, and I want the school to be a welcoming place for the parents, too.

In Ms. P.'s school district, the majority of the migrant parents work in a meatpacking plant and stay through the school year.

When the demographics of the migrants in Ms. P.'s school district shifted from predominantly Spanish-speaking workers from Texas to include a large number of children from countries in Africa, the district was challenged to find translators and classroom personnel who spoke Lingala and French. The majority of the children who have enrolled in the migrant program from Africa had not ever attended school, but the ones who been in school in their home countries had attended schools where the language of instruction was French. Finding materials for those children, books and other curriculum materials, as well as assessments, in French was as challenging as finding classroom personnel, but the district saw that as a priority in helping the children and families experience belonging at the schools.

Ms. P. works in both the summer program and the regular year program, and she and the other teachers facilitate the children's transition from the summer program to the regular school year, communicating with the school year teachers to provide continuity for the children. At the end of the summer program, Ms. P. gathers information from the summer program teachers about the children and their work in the program and regularly provides that information to the regular school year teachers.

We can say to the teachers, 'Now this child's reading here' or 'You might as well start here when you do this' or for the French-speaking students I have, 'well, they came with no literacy and not a whole lot of math,'

and they've come a long way in the summer program.

Ms. P.'s school district also has an after-school program during the regular school year for children identified as a migrant, and that program provides the homework help. The regular school program and the after-school program also provide information about children's progress to the summer program, so there is great continuity for the children who stay in the school district from year to year.

Ms. P. concluded our interview with her by saying that the summer program in her school is "extra special" to her. She remembers that her mother asked her the first summer that she was working in the summer migrant education program, "So, have you found your new mission field?" knowing just kind of how my mind is, that's just kind of how I work. . . And I still feel like that way!"

3.2. "I understand migrant kids' passion and their pain."

Mr. D. has been a teacher in a school district in the US Midwest for his entire professional career. He began working with the migrant education program in his school district at the end of his first year of teaching. He has been a teacher in the program, a recruiter (meaning he went out to migrant camps or farms and actually looked for children who could benefit from the migrant education program, met with their parents, and enrolled them in the program). He has been the director of the migrant education program in his school district, and he has been a consultant about migrant education to other school districts and his state office of migrant education. Mostly, though, he loves to teach migrant students.

He told us,

I think I connect with my migrant students because I too left my country. I understand [migrant kids'] passion and their pain. There's a lot of pain in migrant kids . . . often times they are tough, and they don't want you to see it. But when we do, when we go deeper, [we see it]. One summer I taught, the children and I read the

book by Gary Paulson, *The Crossing*.” [The crossing is a book about a youth who swims across the Rio Grande River to enter the United States.]

Mr. D went on to say,

Oh, my god, that was an emotional summer. . . We read together because there were different reading levels [and different levels of understanding English]. I scaffolded as much as I could. [Each day, after reading] we went into what we called a “closed session” [to discuss the reading]. We sat in a circle [and called it] a closed session because whatever was discussed stayed there. I said, “Unless there is abuse, which I have to report, we should be able to support each other.” There was a particular boy [who] told his story of crossing the Rio Grande on the shoulders of his uncle. [His] parents couldn’t swim, so they had to stay in Mexico; they couldn’t make it. The Rio Grande was really heavy [because] it had rained. “The cries in the night!” he said, “I cried and cried.” We [the students and I] all cried together. We just had that bond. There’s a connection I think that a lot of teachers sometimes don’t get.

Mr. D. told us how the children in his classroom form a bond and a community, and they all come to feel as if they belong and to know that Mr. D. truly cares about them. He described a time when a child in one of the families he worked with died of leukemia. The children in his class discussed the death and what they could do for the family and decided to hold a fund-raiser for the family. They knew that the family probably did not have money for a funeral. While the children were holding the fund-raiser, Mr. D. and another teacher went to talk with the funeral director, who agreed to hold the funeral and burial for \$1000, a considerable discount.

Mr. D. has high expectations for migrant students, and he communicates those expectations in words and action. He recalls his own experiences with low expectations, both from the people he was living with and the people he had contact with at school.

When I moved here, I was 18 and I lived with an uncle and my aunt, and they were not well educated. I used to say, “Someday I’ll have a masters’ [degree]” and they [would say], “No, no, you get a job somewhere in a factory.”

Mr. D’s personal experience with his own high school teachers and counselors mirrored that of his uncle and aunt—Mr. D. couldn’t possibly take the ACT or go to college.

I went to my high school counselor because all my friends were talking about the ACT test, and I had no idea what an ACT test was. . . I said, “I want to take this test.” . . She said, “Oh, you don’t need to, there’s so many jobs in restaurants in town.”

So he was basically on his own. He said, “It took a really strong will to go and find out how do I get [a professional degree.]”

Mr. D. does not expect that all of his students will have that strong will on their own. He not only expects the children he teaches to learn well, but he also expects them to go on to post-secondary education, and he helps every one of them to make plans for education beyond high school. He told us several stories of helping children get accepted into post-secondary education and helping them secure the scholarship money that would allow them to take advantage of their acceptances. On the day of our interview with him, he was taking three children to enroll in the local community college.

3.3. “She has a migrant heart.”

Ms. B., another teacher we interviewed, has taught pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and first grade, as well as English as a Second Language class for adults in a school that serves migrant children in the summer and during the regular school year, both for more than 20 years. She told us,

I love [the migrant education program]. I love the population. I love what the program does for kids [and] the opportunities that we give the kids. . . We have visiting art teachers and we [take the children] swimming. [The program teaches] the whole child.

When Ms. B. began working in the migrant program, she did not speak Spanish, while nearly all of the migrant families that traveled to her small town for summer work, spoke Spanish as their first language. She was able to find high school children in the summer program who would translate for her, but she felt that was not enough. So she enrolled in a teacher exchange

program that brought teachers from Mexico to Ms. B.'s school, and then Ms. B. went to Mexico to observe in schools there and to have extended stays with the teachers from Mexico who had been in Ms. B.'s school and actually stayed in her home while they were in the US. Not only did Ms. B. learn Spanish, but she also gained "a perspective on how the parents feel" when they are in a new community and teachers speak English to them and they don't understand.

Ms. B. said that speaking Spanish in her classroom had a huge payoff. Children who seem shy and quiet at first "blossom and come out of their shell—they're not shy kids." Her classroom becomes a safe and secure place for the Spanish-speaking children, raising their comfort levels greatly. More than that, her speaking Spanish helps to communicate with her parents and raise their comfort levels with her.

Ms. B. explained that being in the schools in the area in Mexico where the children she taught came from gave her insight into not only what the children were learning, but also the way the schools function and the expectations of the schools for parents. The teacher exchange helped her, conversely, to

see in our daily lives the things that we take for granted. . . What I assume is common knowledge because this is where I grew up and this is how we do it here. . . It's our common knowledge but it's not completely universal.

Making that "common knowledge" explicit for parents and children is something that Ms. B. works hard at. She said, "It's the relationship and the expectations that I have to communicate" and explain.

For Ms. B., "one of the neatest things [is] to work with the families and to help them see the importance of education." She also works to help parents understand what the schools in the US expect of parents and what she calls "the school way" in her school because "it's different in their countries of origin." Building relationships with parents and families is something that Ms. B. works at. When children enroll at her school, she offers help with whatever they need—hooking up

utilities, directions for how to get places, "empowering them to be able to call the police" if they need to—as she says, "basically helping with the daily life kind of things." One family, for example, had moved and had transportation issues. Ms. B. invited the parents to "drop their kids off at Ms. B.'s house (she lives close to the school)." She said that she'd "make sure that the older girls got to the bus and the younger girl would come to school with me and then she would go to class."

Ms. B. believes that her responsibility goes far beyond teaching children academics—it's to "make sure that kids love school, that they know that they are accepted, and can have a safe place to learn. And," she said, that they "know that learning is fun." According to Ms. B., she's only done what she does to help the families and the children, and that the relationships she's built as a result are "the gifts that I've received [that] far outweigh anything that I've done."

4. Conclusion

All of the teachers of migrant children we have interviewed are the first and most consistent contacts in the migrant children's new communities. The teachers whose stories are included in this paper are only three of the many whose work extends far beyond presenting academics to the children. Indeed, they actively serve as agents on the children's and their families' behalf in their schools, their school districts, and their communities. They help the children and their families negotiate their entrance, even if for only a short time, into those new classrooms and those new communities. In their classrooms, these teachers create environments that are welcoming, that help children and their families belong, and that lead children to develop feelings of competence and confidence, all of which help to mitigate the trauma they have experienced. The teachers are indeed first responders!!

References

- Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES). (2020). Retrieved from: www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces
- Bruner, J. S. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bruner, J. S. (1961). The act of discovery. *Harvard Educational Review*, 31, 21–32.
- Gonzalez, E., Jr. (2020). Migrant farm workers: Our nation’s invisible population. *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Community of Practice (COPDEI)*, Purdue University, Lafayette, IN.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). *Statistics on international labour migration*. www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/policy-areas/...
- Lingard, L., Albert, M., & Levinson, W. (2008). Grounded theory, mixed methods, and action research. *BMJ*, 337, 459-461.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- NCTSN. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. www.nctsn.org
- Paulsen, G. (2005). *The crossing*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Rosales, X. (nd). *Toxic Stress*. Immokalee, FL: Center for Child Stress and Health. Retrieved from med.fsu.edu/childStress
- United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). (2019). *Global Trends*. unhcr.org.
- US Department of Education. (1966). Title I. Part C—Education of Migratory Children. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.
- Zemelman, S. (2013). Teachers’ stories need to be heard. *The Chicago Reporter*, March 4, 2013. Retrieved from www.chicagoreporter.com