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# A Legacy of Racial Capital: How the U.S. Education System Produces a School-to-Farm Pipeline

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# A Legacy of Racial Capital: How the U.S. Education System Produces a School-to-Farm Pipeline

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Ethnic, Gender, & Labor Studies  
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# A LEGACY OF RACIAL CAPITAL: HOW THE U.S. PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM PRODUCES A SCHOOL-TO-FARM PIPELINE

## **Abstract**

The U.S. public education system focuses on providing student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness and to ensure equal access for all students. Despite this emphasis on equal education, Mexican migrant youth continue to have low graduation rates. The legal status of farmworkers makes them vulnerable to hard labor and poor working conditions resulting in frequent mobility (within the U.S.) for their survival. Along with frequent mobility, the criminalization and negative stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans influence the way in which migrant children are perceived by their educators and peers in educational institutions causing them to drop out and therefore be more likely continue the migrant lifestyle. This paper will explore the pattern of historical practices that reproduce generations of cheap and docile labor for the purpose of capital accumulation in which the education system functions as a school-to-farm pipeline, including the Pacific Northwest. Possible micro and macro solutions that can serve to provide equitable education and resources for migrant families will be discussed.

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## Introduction

Despite the emphasis in access to public education for all children, the U.S. education system is neglecting adequate services to migrant children and their families. This neglect has left the migrant Latinx farmworker population as the most uneducated group in the United States (Romanowski, 2003). Alvarez-McHatton (2004), found that Latinx youth made up the highest dropout rates of all groups, 27 percent compared to 19 percent for African-Americans and 10 percent for whites (Alvararez-McHatton, 2004). There are approximately one million migrant workers in the U.S. whose labor provide national profits of almost \$25 billion annually, but migrant farmworkers do not share in this wealth. Farmworkers earn approximately \$6.15 an hour, making salaries below the poverty line (U.S Department of Labor 2005 & Villarejo, 2000). Agricultural industries rely on low skilled labor, resulting in low wages, for an occupation that has been considered one of the most dangerous in the U.S (Villarejo, 2000).

Migrant farmworkers' undocumented immigration status makes them vulnerable to hard labor and poor working conditions. Farmworkers are isolated from mainstream society, harvesting hundreds of pounds of produce a day with their bare hands, and suffering from the painful aching of their backs in the sweltering sun (Holmes, 2013). Many migrant workers live in migrant camps because they cannot afford housing. The poor working and living conditions of migrant farmworkers barely sustain families in an almost never-ending cycle of temporary labor, given that time spent in each city depends on the farming season, weather, access to food, housing, and labor demand.

Low wages combined with their undocumented status prevent migrant farmworkers from obtaining adequate healthcare or furthering their education. Farmworkers' wages force them to

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move frequently due to the need to follow the agricultural cycle, affecting the children's access to a consistent education, adjustments to making new friends, academic expectations, and different graduation requirements in each new school (Whittaker et al.,1997). Children begin to experience the migrant life at a very young age with "no possessions of their own, no special place to sleep, and no special place to live" (Green, 2003, p. 62). Frequent mobility, lack of healthcare, and impoverished living conditions affects children's access to education and often causes them to drop out or continue the migrant life. The criminalization of undocumented Latinx immigrants has also affected how students are treated in schools based on the negative racial stereotypes that educators and other children have about immigrants and people of color (Green, 2003).

This paper explores the experiences of migrant families with the United States' public education system in the Pacific Northwest. Their experiences are situated within a critical examination of the overarching system of education as an institution. My research links micro experiences to macro systems to address the impact of institutional racism on Mexican migrant farmworkers and their children.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Social Construction of the Mexican Racial Identity in the United States for the Purpose of Labor Segregation and Capital Accumulation**

Mexican Americans have had a long history of exclusion that continues to affect Mexicans and Mexican Americans today. Mexicans in the United States have experienced an inconsistent racial categorization. Glenn (2002) argues that both "race and gender have been incorporated as fundamental organizing axes of the labor system in the United States, and in turn the labor system has been organized in ways that create and re-create race and gender categories

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and relationships” (p. 56). For example, the inconsistent identity of Mexican Americans has informed the present and past treatment of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the context of academic, labor and social segregation (Bowman, 2001). Under the 1848, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the federal government decided to grant citizenship to Mexicans living in the American Southwest and Mexicans were soon racially classified as white (Donato & Hanson, 2012). Citizenship granted via white status allowed Mexicans to partake in interracial marriages & contracts (taxation) and thus land acquisitions (Takaki, 2008). The economic mobilization of Mexicans threatened the cheap labor force that growers had benefited from which resulted in a legal change to their racial status. Mexicans’ were re-classified as the ‘Mexican race’ in 1930. Consequently, the different classification of Mexicans as white and non-white/other has been used as a tool by the American Federation of Labor in which Mexicans constitute cheap labor and are regarded as incapable of becoming full American.

Under those circumstances, agriculture began to rely on Mexican laborers as immigration laws like the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement and the 1924 Immigration Act excluded Asian labor. This resulted in the new reliance of docile labor from Filipinos and Mexicans (Ngai, 2004). At the time, Clements of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce’s Agricultural Department claimed that “the ‘Oriental and Mexican’ were suited to tasks in the fields, while whites were ‘physically unable to adapt’ themselves to such work” (Takaki, 2008, p. 297). The farmers’ reliance on Mexican laborers was based on essentialist and racist ways of thinking for the purpose of capital accumulation (Nevins, 2010). For example, they expressed how “natural” it was for Mexicans to perform the tasks “it is more humble and you get more for your money” (Takaki, 2008, p. 298).

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In the 1940s and with the emergence of a new world war, labor shortages and low-paying agricultural jobs increased. This led to the intergovernmental agreement among the United States and Mexico to supply temporary labor to Mexican workers for the time of the war (although the program lasted longer than anticipated). The Bracero Program brought millions of Mexican guest workers to the United States from 1942 to 1964 (Bracero History Archive, n.d.). Specific states like Colorado benefited from the Mexican laborers where “the cultivation of sugar beets required an insatiable cheap labor force” (Donato, 2003, p. 70). Growers provided labor to Mexicans who were believed to be undeveloped and in need of leadership (Holmes, 2013), thus creating an illusion that the growers were helping Mexicans by giving them work. J.L. Camp argued that Mexicans were “inferior as a racial-ethnic group but superior as sugar beet workers” (Donato, 2003, p. 72). He further commented that:

[The Mexican is from] a hybrid origin, a cross between the native Indian and the sum of Spain, criminal, adventurous, lawless, and vicious... We must acknowledge that the Mexican will work, and does work, but he is a child in mind... He is easily influenced, particularly if you have his confidence... Then how do we expect our dusky brothers to stand up against this with minds no more developed than a 16 year old child... No blame is to be attached in these boys... I want to impress [the following]: get the confidence of the Mexican, treat him as you would be treated; he can be led easier than driven. We have got him, and we are going to keep him, and we are going to make the best of it whether we like it or not” (Donato, 2003, p. 72).

The construction of Mexicans as an inferior race justified farmers’ mistreatment of Mexicans as cheap vulnerable labor. These racist beliefs were applied broadly to Mexicans in public spaces, thus stigmatizing all Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike. Like the infamous signs that read "Colored Only" in the American South, it was common to see signs in establishments that read "Mexicans and Dogs Not Allowed" in Texas and across the Southwest (Donato, 2003). In addition to being socially segregated, the academic segregation of Mexican American children was enacted on a massive scale by local school officials and school board

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members who often “purported that segregation would help them assimilate and provide better opportunities to learn English” (Donato, 2003, p. 211). Instead, the neglect from school officials was re-creating a non-white cheap and docile labor source.

### **Political and Economic Forces: Extraction of Labor and Externalization of Care**

The extraction of migrant labor continues to be influenced by the economic forces motivating political agreements and laws. Glenn (2002), argues that the “capitalist industrialization both incorporated existing race/gender hierarchies and reformulated and rearticulated race/gender relationships” (p. 58). To illustrate some of these practices, agreements like the Bracero program sought the labor of Mexicans when there was a shortage of laborers in the U.S. However, when the labor of Braceros was no longer needed they were disposed and sent back to Mexico without any additional compensation for their labor. As Nevins (2010) argues, the Bracero program reinforced the reliance and “commodification of Mexicans as low-wage labor through the creation of an apartheid-like dual wage system” (p. 129). In addition, the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 (NAFTA) gave Mexico, Canada, and the United States the ability to create and modify economic rules opening different types of outside investment by limiting government regulation and ensuring investors a safe and abundant return on their money (McCarty, 2007, p. 106). NAFTA was established to aid Mexico’s economy, but Mexico’s economy did not achieve the same economic gains as the United States and Canada. As a result of the agreement, Mexico became the least self-sufficient of the three parties resulting in increased migration from Mexico to the U.S and Canada of which many are unauthorized (McCarty, 2007). According to Otero (2011), the more migrant workers in rich countries, the fewer the rights are established to protect them from inhumane working conditions (p. 385). Political and economic forces then push Mexicans to “migrate in order for themselves and their

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families to survive” (Holmes, 2013, p. 17). In the same way, the United States creates an illusion of economic opportunity through the promises of the “American Dream”. The increased migration to the U.S. is due to the inviting systems of labor, yet “at the same time political forces ban immigrants from entering the country” (Holmes, 2013, p. 13). Therefore, the extraction of labor is accomplished through the inviting practices of the economy demanding labor but the externalization of care is achieved through deportation. An ‘otherness’ is achieved through the negative stereotypes applied to Mexicans without access to citizenship and even Mexican Americans presented to American society. This social phenomenon creates an interdependent but unequal relationship that benefits the U.S. economy.

For the purpose of maintaining a cycle that extracts labor without granting adequate benefits to migrant workers, the U.S public must do two things; internalize the negative stereotypes associated with Mexicans as “other” and internalize superiority about their own American citizenship and race. The negative rhetoric in mainstream media regarding undocumented immigrants has created false stereotypes and influencing prejudices (Higgins et al., 2010).

In the mid-twentieth century the negative depictions of undocumented people reinforced the idea of the “illegal” (Nevis, 2010). The use of the word illegal ‘othered’ undocumented workers allowing them to be seen as less than human and deserving of their circumstances. This narrative led to the rhetoric about restricting “crime-prone” immigrants, a narrative that serves a hidden purpose regarding politics, degradation, and population control for the securitization of profit (Nevis, 2010, & Longazel, 2013). “Crimmigration” for example, describes the convergence of the criminal justice and immigration enforcement system that have benefited from reinforcing the negative racial biases about the undocumented Latinx population (Armenta,

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2017). In the 1990s, Congress expanded statutes that created more criminal grounds for deportation and incentivized large, for-profit detention centers, mimicking the mass incarceration state (Dillard, 2018). The criminalization of undocumented workers allows for the commodification of workers through profit by criminalizing them and by denying undocumented workers a pathway to citizenship (Longazel, 2013). Linares (2006) points out that “U.S. migrant worker policies were, and still are, designed and adjusted to accommodate the needs of the United States labor force and supply options, and not for the protections of workers.” (p. 328). That being the case, criminalization allows for inhumane working conditions and low wages to persist, especially for undocumented migrant farmworkers.

Another equally important way farmworkers are vulnerable is to the dangers of agriculture; it has been classified as the most dangerous industry in the United States, yet farmworkers are not protected by law against accidents or long-term disability (Prado et al., 2017). Farmworkers pick fruits and vegetables bent over, day to day, moving quickly while exposed to pesticides and extreme weather conditions (Holmes, 2013). Farmworkers are mistreated by those in charge of the camps mostly because they do not speak English or Spanish or solely based on their Indigenous background. The inability to communicate results in wage theft and mistreatment from Mestizos (a person having Spanish and Indigenous blood) towards Indigenous peoples. Even though Mestizo and Indigenous farmworkers collectively suffer as agricultural laborers in the U.S., there exists a hierarchy among Mestizos and Indigenous workers at the farm (Stavans, 2010). The racial division among farmworkers in migrant camps results in Indigenous people being discriminated against based on the color of their skin, culture, characteristics, and language (Stavans, 2010).

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According to the U.S Department of Labor (2005), the average individual farmworker income ranged from \$12,500 to \$14,999, and the average total family income ranged from \$17,500 to \$19,999 in 2012. Farmworker incomes are below the U.S. government's poverty guidelines. The need for money forces farmworkers to work extended hours, prioritize work over breaks, and to seek out their children's help for survival. Due to the seasonal work, farmworkers travel from state to state looking for jobs, often sleeping in their cars and taking showers in public parks (Holmes, 2013). Long hours working, no protective equipment and exposure to pesticides result in body aches, decay, and injuries. A study of the brains of Latino farmworkers and non-farmworkers showed that long-term exposure to pesticides might lead to the development of neurological dysfunction (Bahrami et al., 2017). Neurological dysfunction affects the brain, spinal cord, cranial nerves, and the autonomic nervous system. Long-term exposure to pesticides may put people at risk of developing depression, or neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease (Bahrami et al., 2017).

The poor economic status of farmworkers and frequent movement forces them to live several months in squatter shacks made of cardboard, plastic sheets, broken-down cars or in company-owned labor camps. Migrant camps are often rusted tin-roofed tool sheds lined up within a few feet of each other or small chicken coops in long rows. Along with having no privacy, bathrooms and showers are shared in a separate large, plywood building with concrete floors (Holmes, 2013). In the past, growers felt no responsibility for the living conditions of migrant workers, "they have finished harvesting my crops, I will kick them out on the country road. My obligation is ended" (Takaki, 2008, p. 299). Today, Holmes (2013) describes farms as equally racially segregated labor camps that are hidden behind company buildings where the living conditions are no different than the past and the attitudes of the growers are questionable.

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### **Education in the U.S: A New Source of Cheap Labor**

The early twentieth century is characterized as a time when local educational professionals were in control of schools and beginning to serve children from different racial backgrounds (Donato & Hanson, 2012, p. 210). Galindo (2011) argues, that nativism was present in the education of Mexican and Mexican Americans during this period. Nativism makes distinctions between “true members of the nation and “foreigner/aliens” who represent a threat to the nation through differences in culture, language, political ideology, religion, or race” (Galindo, 2011, p. 324). Early literature focused on the deficits and “retardation” of Mexicans and Mexican Americans students (Valencia, 2002, p. 85). A scientist stated in the 1920s that “no degree of education or social action can effectively overcome the handicap” of being “an inferior or distant race” (Blanton, 2012, p. 70). This negative view of Mexicans as inferior resulted in segregated schools and inequitable education based on a paternalistic kind of racism as exemplified in this statement, “Let him [the Mexican] have as good as an education but still let him know he is not as good as a white man” (Takaki, 2008, p. 303).

Mexican American children were seen as “intellectually inferior, culturally deprived, indifferent about education, and expected to drop out of school before reaching junior high” (Donato, 2003, p. 69). With this popular narrative, Mexican and Mexican American children were denied the same level of education that whites were given during the twentieth century. Despite being discriminated against and forced to assimilate, some children made it beyond elementary school. Still, the small percentage of Mexicans that made it were “channeled into low-courses or vocational paths” (Donato, 2003, p. 69) thus creating a second generation of low wage labor. A farmer in Texas understood that a good education would empower Mexicans to economically mobilize so he said, “If I wanted a man I would want one of the more ignorant

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ones... They would make more desirable citizens if they would stop about the seventh grade” (Takaki, 2008, p. 303). Therefore, negative representation of Mexicans was reproduced in schools through an English-only and vocational curriculum that did not prepare Mexican and Mexican American students academically but instead “directed them towards a future of expendable manual labor” (Galindo, 2011, p. 327). In 1926, Fort Collins, CO Superintendent A.H Dunn justified his reasoning for segregating ‘backward pupils’ by stating to the school board that:

[These students] are a severe handicap in ordinary academic work, often much over age and over size and not associating with other pupils well. The success we met with in this room has justified me. I felt, in recommending the creation of another special room that would be still more distinctly adapted to this type of pupils (Galindo, 2011, p. 327).

Despite not being fully subject to Jim Crow laws, Mexicans experienced a Jim-Crow-like environment in and outside the school. Donato (2003), explored the Fort Collins district census record, school board minutes, superintendent reports, oral interviews, and other reports written between 1920 and 1960 to uncover the experiences of Mexicans. Donato (2003) found that schools provided a colonization program focused on a segregated English-only curriculum were Fort Collins, Colorado was creating a “permanent supply of cheap Mexican labor” (Donato, 2003, p. 84).

### **Education Today**

The average graduation rate of migrant students in Washington was 67% in 2016 (K-12 Data & Reports, 2017). Despite the growth in graduation rates, migrant children continue to live under extreme poverty, move frequently, and continue to fall behind in school. In 1966, as part of Title I Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) the Migrant Education Program was established. Funds are intended to support programs that cater towards migrant

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students and to try to ensure that migrant students are not penalized “in any manner by disparities among states in curriculum, graduation requirements, or state academic content and student academic achievement standards” (Migrant Education Program, 2018). Despite the Migrant Education Program, students of color continue to experience exclusion from their teachers and peers in schools (Villegas, 1988). Every year, schools experience a growth of migrant students and in many instances multiculturalism “gets translated into a sombrero hung on a classroom wall” (Kilman, 2005, p. 26) resulting in the exclusion of students by allowing harmful stereotypes in the classroom. Migrant children fall behind in school because every state has its own department of education and laws regulating finance, attendance, and curriculum (Migrant Education Program, 2018).

In addition to the lack of critical multicultural training in schools, undocumented students are experiencing a school-to-deportation pipeline (Dillard, 2018). Along with being migrant, some of these students are also undocumented. According to the most recent Pew Research Center data, an estimated 725,000 students in grades K–12 are undocumented in the U.S. (Dillard, 2018). Today, local enforcement agencies collaborate with immigration officials and more undocumented students are being wrongly accused of having ties to gangs, pushing them into the school-to-deportation pipeline (Dillard, 2018).

### **Value for Education: Dismantling the Myth of Mexicans as Indifferent to Education**

The idea that Mexicans are indifferent to education has been a consistent assertion in the U.S. These claims that Mexican and Mexican Americans are indifferent toward education are “particularly seen in (a) some very early master’s theses (1920s, 1930s), (b) published literature, and (c) opinions voiced in media outlets” (Valencia, 2002, p.84). Many of these claims focused on the perceived deficits of the families such as an inherent “retardation” and “parental

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indifference to the value of education is transmitted to the children” (Valencia, 2002, p. 86).

Delgado-Gaitan (1992) found the following:

In Mexican-American families, the transmission of educational values is shaped by the family's low socioeconomic condition and the parents' low levels of formal education in the U.S. Mexican-American parents have viewed the educational system as a means of economic mobility for their children, thus, education is highly valued (p. 498).

A family's lack of resources was often a determinant of how much the parents were able to be involved with the children's education, not a cultural deficit or devaluation of formal education as the myth suggests. Delgado-Gaitan (1992) found that parents who were less knowledgeable about school used social networks, their own experience as parents who were not granted the opportunity to get an education, and emotional support to create a level of involvement. Families collectively fought to end segregated schools and sought legal recognition. For example, in 1991 San Diego, California's school board decided to build a separate facility for Mexican pupils across the tracks of their barrio. This decision resulted in the organization of Mexican parents who created El Komite de Vecinos de Lemon Grove and decided to boycott schools (Ruiz, 2001). Besides boycotting segregated schools, parents in Houston, TX. fought for legal recognition via community-based education by creating *Huelga schools*. Huelga schools taught youth about Chicano history, culture, and politics (Ruiz, 2001, p. 266). Although the Huelga schools were temporary they were linked to the political struggle of the Mexican community to be recognized as a minority group and be given appropriate and equitable education. The fight for inclusion continued in 1930 in the case of *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* parents witnessed the first court hearing in favor of school desegregation in the United States (Ruiz, 2001).

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### **Cultural Humility within the Institution: Lack of Staffing with Cultural Humility**

Historically education policies that served Mexican and Mexican Americans were influenced by the needs of local growers. Anglo educators in the twentieth century, prepared children “to follow the footsteps of their parents” as farmers knew that a quality education would inspire them to fight for better wages and working conditions (Takaki, 2008, p. 303). A Texas superintendent shared that “it was up to the white population to keep the Mexican on his knees in an onion patch” by denying them an education (Takaki, 2008, p.304). Immigrant children today continue to fall behind therefore, school neglect contributes to the creation of a cheap “unskilled” labor force (Free & Kriz, 2016, p.187). Due to the continuous belief that Mexicans and Mexican Americans do not value education, educators interpret the lack of parental involvement as neglect without questioning the historical institutional neglect from schools. Kindler (1995) saw the lack of parental involvement as a barrier that posed many challenges for educators because “parents may be illiterate, may not speak English, may not have a telephone, may live a great distance from the school, or may not wish to be visited” (p. 5). This phenomenon is not a cultural deficit, instead schools fail to account for the structural barriers experienced by migrant families (Valencia, 2002, p. 85).

Argued by Deborah (2012) “the long-term economic and social integration of migrant communities is directly linked to their ability to make effective human capital investments and to pass these investments on to future generations” (p. 19). Not only is the education system struggling to incorporate migrant students and their families, schools are struggling to cope with an increase of students who are ‘English Language Learners’ (Deborah, 2012, p. 19). Free & Kriz (2016) found that language and communication, low wages and poverty, migratory experience, legal status, and a teacher’s stereotypes are some of the hardships faced by migrant

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students and their families. Complicating the issue is the hegemonic belief that educators have about migrant students in relation to citizenship, their “otherness”, those belonging to “American identity” and the idea of who is undeserving.

### **Dual-Language Learning vs. Emergence on English Only**

Despite the U.S. not having an official language, there is no question that English is the enforced language in government documents, major businesses and school curriculum. English was not the first language spoken in North America however; American Indians were forced into English speaking boarding schools while enslaved people were punished for speaking their native language. The use of English in schools comes from the early assimilationist views and the Americanization period in the early 19th century. These practices constitute ideological power, as Auerbach (1993) noted that “language has a particularly important role in exercising this control: Authority and power are manifested by institutional practices around language use” (p. 11). Language proficiency serves as criterion for determining which people will complete different levels of education and their future careers and salaries (Auerbach, 1993, p. 11). As such, the English-only classroom has been considered an ‘innovative’ immersive approach, but it actually creates unequal social and economic opportunities for students whose native language is not English.

States like Arizona have passed bills stipulating English as the language of instruction in the public schools (Donato, 2003, p. 24). For migrant students whose native language is not English, an English-only classroom causes them to fall behind, thus reinforcing the negative stereotypes of inferiority and indifference to education. Lucas et al., (1994) argue that the ‘bilingual education debate’ is “more strongly based on political than on pedagogical considerations’ (p. 538). In addition, Lucas et al., (1994) found that instruction in native

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languages (language emergence) can give English learners greater access to content knowledge while acknowledging their prior knowledge and experiences, otherwise known as cultural assets. Education centered on the needs and experiences of students acts as a “medium for social interaction and establishment of rapport; fostered family involvement; and fostered students' development of, knowledge of, and pride in their native languages and cultures” (Lucas et al., p. 545). The maintenance of English in institutions like schools only functions to maintain advantage of the socially powerful.

### **Methods and Participants**

This study about the experiences of migrant laborers within the Pacific Northwest used a preliminary grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology used to develop theory grounded on the experiences of the participants. Grounded theory conducted from a constructivist epistemological perspective is particularly suited for examining processes, structures, and context which are key to provide insight into the lives of migrant farmworkers in relation to the education system (Denzin et al., 2013). The following research questions guided this study; (a) What are the experiences of migrant youth with education; (b) Is the education system serving or neglecting migrant youth; (c) What is or has been the role of the farm owners who employ the Latinx population in relation to migrant education? This study attempts to give a voice to a community that has been silenced and neglected.

In order to effectively implement constructivist grounded theory appropriately, the study utilized semi-structured interviews and an observational technique at a labor camp. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews that allowed me to gather individual ethnographies of current farmworkers who were over the age of eighteen. The interviewees were identified using a snowball method; a trusted member of the community introduced me to a laborer who

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later directed me to other qualifying individuals who were willing to be interviewed. My participant role helped me build rapport to conduct the interviews. My ability to speak Spanish gave me a certain advantage; however, I do not speak Indigenous languages from Mexico which was crucial in some cases where the interviewees required interpretation. My representation as a woman of color was also to my benefit but it was obvious that my education and upbringing distanced me from the community; therefore, I had both an insider and outsider perspective.

The observations took place primarily at the labor camp where I volunteered daily for five days. Observations were both descriptive and exploratory. My presence at the labor camp was crucial in that I was not there solely to collect data but also to find insights; it was not objective but rather subjective research to achieve an up close and personal connection to the participants in this ethnographic study. In order to prevent memory bias, I used a reflective journal throughout the data collection process. This approach was supplemented through the interviews gathered, which were dissected and analyzed using symbolic interactionism. Interviews were analyzed sentence by sentence. The answers received were given an initial code that took into consideration the verbal response and the inflection in the participant's voice and their body language. The initial code was followed by a sub-code that connected to a larger theme. This allowed me to easily detect patterns and to assess their connection to current themes in the literature.

### **Findings**

My findings were in line with what is represented in current literature. There were many prevailing themes evident in the interview data and my field observations. Broadly, my research confirmed how migrant families value education as a form of upward social mobility and how they are caught up in a cycle of the extraction of labor and externalization of care which limits

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their engagement with the education system. Even though the participants demonstrated a high interest in education, their inability to respond to additional questions about the education system demonstrated the neglect from this system towards the migrant farmworker population and their need for more knowledge. Participants indicated that although they wanted to be part of their children's education, low wages and long hours prevented them from being involved. They feared losing wages and could not get release time. Two participants shared their experience with the education system as unfulfilling due to having little to no support from the school to pursue higher education. The participant may have experienced neglect due to their frequent movement and the negative stereotypes that justify low expectation of Mexican migrant youth, even those with American citizenship. Despite recent funding for migrant education, it is evident that unjust historical practices that have excluded Mexicans and Mexican Americans continue to be present in today's education system.

### **Expressed Value for Education Versus Neglect from School**

All of the participants interviewed supported their children's education and preferred that they not become agricultural workers. One interviewee said, "first of all it (education) is important because you get a chance to get a better job and I don't want this for my daughter" (Participant 3). Again, what I observed is consistent with the research of Delgado-Gaitan (1992) who found that in Mexican and Mexican-American families, the transmission of educational values is shaped by the family's low socioeconomic condition where parents have viewed the educational system as a means of economic mobility for their children, thus, education is highly valued (p. 498). This demonstrated that parents not only cared for their children's education but that they understood that education was a way to achieve economic mobility. However, the answers that the families provided were somewhat brief, lacked specificity and they did not

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share a lot of details about the education of their children. One could argue that culturally, Mexican parents trust the school system to provide quality education without parental involvement. However, as discussed previously there are other social and political factors to consider.

In general, participants were unable to answer specific school-related questions. For example, those who already had children in the school system had no knowledge about after school programs. This demonstrates that despite having federal funding to help migrant children, it appears that these funds (and the programs sponsored by these funds) are not reaching all children or being provided adequately. Additionally, two of the participants that had newborns were unaware of when or how to admit their children into school once they reached the appropriate age. It was apparent in this study that there was a communication gap between schools and migrant parents.

Compounding communication gaps was the discrimination of and assumptions about Indigenous peoples. One participant reported their experience with discrimination when speaking their native language: “Sometimes they [providers] assume that I do not speak English because I will speak my native language to my people and I can hear them talking about us, how they discriminate against people like us” (Participant 4). This phenomenon of English-only has a long history in the United States that has affected children of color. Borden (2014), found that the use of the dominant [English] language “conceals the division of social classes while the dominant cultural practices force other cultures to define themselves as ‘others’” continuing to affect the social mobility and treatment of the ‘other’ (p. 229) and resulting racial disparity in education.

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### **Stereotypes Lead to Low Expectations**

Included in this study was a visit to a local migrant center that focuses on providing services to migrant workers like English classes, training for better employment, and other educational opportunities. In this visit I had a conversation with two employees of the center. They once worked as migrant workers and reflected on their educational experiences which lacked support in advising. Both were unable to graduate from high school but obtained their high school diploma through the help of their local community college a few years later. Once again, the devaluing of Mexican migrant children contributes to the way they are treated as they are seen as incapable of learning or as a burden on the system without promising returns. This racial mistreatment is another way of communicating how different and “other” they are socially, even if they have American citizenship. Their racial and ethnic identity and their status as children of undocumented migrant labor from Mexico results in stigma.

### **Labor Exploitation Limits Access**

The majority of the participants also claimed that the limited time they have to be part of their children’s education is due to their work hours. “Work! Time is what we need the most, time” (Participant 4). Their extensive daily hours of work do not correspond with a conventional school schedule. For instance, participants claimed they worked over 12 hours a day and have no time to attend conferences and afterschool programs, even those offered at the camp. This was evident at the camp where I volunteered. Also, different volunteers went into the camp but none were directly from schools. The lack of detail in the participants’ responses also meant that there were no programs for the parents involved. Basically, I observed that employers are not working with schools to create programs that match the needs of migrant parents. Instead employers let different volunteers come into migrant camps without supervision or securing

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background checks. Allowing unsupervised volunteers who have not been officially screened into migrant camps places the children of migrant workers at risk. At the camp, I observed the unsupervised environment and our camp lead reminding children to always be in groups and to not go anywhere with strangers.

### **Recommendations**

This small preliminary study revealed some of the inequalities that Mexican children and their migrant families face. My findings were consistent with a large body of research that confirms my observations about persistent structural inequality and its impact on schooling for migrant children. Based on what I learned, to truly begin to provide equitable education to migrant children, there are some actions that need to be taken at the local and national level. These efforts include small and large initiatives, everything from addressing implicit bias and cultural awareness in the classroom to policy and structural revisions.

Understanding the experience of migrant families in schools is important in order to provide the adequate resources to students and their families. Unlike cultural competency, cultural humility insists that educators continue to work towards their understanding of diverse populations. The East Coast Migrant Head Start 2016 Annual Report began to enhance their knowledge about indigenous communities and the different cultures they serve. The program began to incorporate in their curriculum an acknowledgement about the lives of migrant children and the cultural background (ECMHSP Annual Report, 2016, p. 9). Teachers and administrators would also benefit from professional development that teaches them to actively be anti-biased and antiracist. Cultural humility can also be expressed by providing services centered on the experiences of migrant families and their Indigenous languages. In addition, a culturally responsive education system includes having a political understanding of the legal status of the

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students that empowers students rather than criminalizing them. Schools should work towards ending the school to prison pipeline by revising educational policies that incriminate students for minor offenses.

Even though migrant workers have been present in the United States for a long time there has been little research about the effectiveness of state funded services in education mainly due to migrant families' frequent movement and lack of reporting. To maximize the services provided to migrant farmworkers and their families there needs to be an investigation of all existing programs with the recommendation of starting an oversight organization that keeps all programs together such as education, healthcare, and other services. Furthermore, because the legal status of migrant farmworkers' makes them vulnerable to exploitive wages, earning an income below the U.S. poverty level, an emergency fund managed at a county level would serve as a lifeline to migrant farmworker families who have nowhere else to turn for financial help (ECMHSP Annual Report, 2016, p. 6). Once the emergency funds are established agencies could advocate for federal funding. Yet, the persistent myth of immigrants as criminals who are a financial burden to the U.S. could prevent taxpayers from contributing to a county or nationwide emergency fund, which is ironic considering how much revenue migrant workers generate in the U.S. economy and social security.

To “promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access”, I suggest a nationwide curriculum for migrant youth (U.S Department of Education). The implementation of a nationwide K-12 curriculum in public schools that allows migrant students to complete their education regardless of their movement would increase the success of migrant students and parent involvement. The Department of Education reserves up to \$10 million each year to fund and conduct Migrant

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Education Coordination Activities (Migrant Education Program, 2018). Despite having this federal funding which could provide national oversight, states use these program funds based on their own initiatives which includes: academic instruction, remedial and compensatory instruction, bilingual and multicultural instruction, vocational instruction, career education services, special guidance, counseling and testing services, health services, and preschool services (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2017). Although these state programs are valuable and should continue there is a need for a nationwide curriculum in public schools for migrant children that includes a confidential database for their educational records and test scores with state to state equivalency. Having a nationwide K-12 curriculum that allows students to continue their education regardless of different state education requirements could increase the graduation rates of migrant youth. This kind of initiative will mitigate the negative impact that occurs due to transitory and temporary work cycles experienced by migrant families who follow seasonal agricultural labor demands.

Glenn (2002), argues that citizenship provides political, civil, and social advantages but “for non-white people and women, citizenship has always been a malleable structure, molded by the efforts of dominant groups seeking to enforce their own definitions of citizenship and its boundaries...” (pg. 55). The use of unauthorized workers has allowed the agriculture sector to accumulate capital without providing employment benefits, healthcare, or decent wages. Therefore, amnesty or comprehensive immigration reform would secure the protection of workers’ rights and alleviate one of the barriers presented to parents such as inhumane working conditions, extended work hours and low wages. Yet amnesty or comprehensive immigration reform offers a temporary institutional change but does not solve the problem of capitalism driving the unjust labor practices faced by migrant farmworkers. It is important to continue to

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address the negative effects of structural racism in relation to capitalism and labor after providing amnesty or a comprehensive immigration reform.

### **Conclusion**

Capitalism relies on the citizen and noncitizen worker for capital accumulation. The American economy is greatly dependent on the cheap and docile labor that undocumented workers provide. Under this system, undocumented migrant farmworkers experience neglect from their employers due to their legal status in the U.S. The citizen and noncitizen worker are then pitted against one another by the myth that noncitizen workers are taking citizens' jobs a form of nativism. Furthermore, the negative racial stereotypes of the "other" reinforces racial ideas about the ideal American citizen and simultaneously promotes the continual oppression of the entire Mexican and Mexican American population - a practice that is reflected in the practices within the U.S. education system. Even though the right to an education is guaranteed by international law in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Underwood, 2018), this paper argues that public schools have neglected to provide equitable education for migrant youth, including those who have U.S. citizenship; and this neglect is institutional racism, which is part of a structure that reproduces cheap and docile laborers systematically extracting of labor and externalizing of care. Therefore, it is important to critically examine the U.S. public education system as a school-to-farm pipeline for capitalist gain.

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