Case Studies: Children of Migrant Workers

Ezequil

I was born in Mexico, Tamaulipas Rio Bravo, and at 8 came to the United States of America [and] it was a lot different from the place that I came from.

What a shock when I started working in the fields at 8 years old. I did not work as hard as the adults did, but I did help my father, my brothers and sister with their rows [of crops] so they could finish. They wanted to finish before it got dark so they could go home, and come back the next day to work again in the sun and the fields. After that year, my father decided to keep coming back to Washington because we earned money. Within two years I was working as hard, taking only one row, but it was still a lot of work for me being just 10 years old.

During the mornings before I went to school I worked for only one and a half hours each day before school. Monday through Friday I went to school after that studied. My father says we should go to school to learn more things, so we won’t have to work in the fields like him, or make my family work in the fields when I get married and have children. He says he did not get the opportunity of going to school. That’s why he is living his life like this. He feels that even though he cannot give his family all that they need, he always gives them his support, and the most important thing, he gives them his love.

Some days I had to work after school because my family wasn’t finished working so I had to help them so they could finish. Those days I couldn’t get my homework done because I was so tired after the work. On weekends, I woke up at 4:30 a.m. to work all day in the sun, so I did not get much time to play with other kids. I never get the opportunity to wake up late like some other kids do during the weekends. My father says we should learn how to work hard, because we need to survive. My father also wants us to be strong, because we do not have money for doctors. He is upset when we are sick, and he can’t take us for medical care.

I have been a migrant worker for 7 years. It hasn’t been easy to move from school to school. In a way it’s ok because you make new friends and see other new places, but is not easy leaving your friends. Now I am 15 years old going on to 16 [and] the years pass so fast and very quickly when you go to different places in a year and meet other people. I am not sure where I will be and what I will be doing five years from now.

(Adapted from Ricki Peto’s “Migrant Worker’s Children,” Peto Student Projects)

Discussion Questions

How are Ezekiel's childhood experiences different from or similar to your own experiences as a child? Try to imagine living a childhood like Ezekiel's. How would you feel about your life? What would be your hopes, fears, joys and sadness?

Look at the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (page 3 of this unit), which Pope John Paul II has supported (see his Familiaris Consortio on the Vatican Web Site, www.vatican.va). Is Esequil denied any of these rights?

In June of 2000, the U.S. Catholic Conference published Children on the Move: The Plight of Immigrant and Refugee Children (full document at www.brycs.org/documents/COTM.pdf). They remind us that children are the most vulnerable of immigrants and refugees, and that our country should recognize their special needs. The Bishops call for more emphasis on educational and health programs for migrant children. How can you find out about migrant workers and their children in your region? How can you support existing public and private programs for them? How can you support advocates who are working for more programs and better laws that will help migrant children?
Iselda

I have been coming to the state of Washington state ever since I was a newborn baby. I was born in Rio Grande City, Texas. I have two brothers and I am the only girl in the family. My parents had to come here from Mexico in order for them to start a new life. They wanted to raise enough money to build a house. I don’t think I’ll be coming over here anymore because my parents are really tired of having to migrate every year. They say they don’t want this kind of life for us anymore.

I have always dreamed of becoming a lawyer but the way things are going it’s going to be a little hard. However, there are some good things about being a migrant worker. For example, you get to meet a lot of new people and see different places. The bad things about being a migrant is that you miss out on many things. For example, you have to leave your hometown every year, your friends, and other very important people in your life. It feels that when you leave, all the good things start to happen. Another reason is that you miss out on a lot of school. I lose some of my credits when I come to Washington.

Working in the fields is the worst part of being a migrant student. You have to go to work every day, work in the hot sun early, then come to school for the rest of the day. You don’t even get to keep all of the money you make. It all has to go to your parents. You also have to wake up at four in the morning to go to work. I’m always tired in school.

Living conditions are not always that good. Sometimes you live in very small houses, and you have to all bunch up in one room. I don’t plan to be a migrant worker when I grow up. I don’t want my children to grow up having to move back and forth. I want for them to get educated and be something in life. I want them to grow up never having to experience any hard work like getting up in the morning and working in the fields. I don’t want my children to teach their children to work in fields. I don’t want to give them the life I am going through right now.

There are certain restrictions on working as a student migrant worker. You are supposed to be sixteen years old to work in the fields. Some people really need the money and have to get fake birth certificates so they can start to work at an early age. There are some thirteen or fourteen year old kids that have to work. Some of them don’t even go to school. A lot of times, even younger kids help out; nobody seems to care.

There is a lot of prejudice against migrant workers. Everywhere you go you experience prejudice. For example, if you go to a store or something, they won’t ask you if need any help. But when an Anglo comes in, they get help. Also the store owners are always walking behind us making sure we don’t steal things. You don’t always experience this, but most of the time you do. Another thing that really expresses prejudice is the check points. When they see Mexicans they always stop to search our cars. I would like to go some place and be treated like everyone else.

(Adapted from Ricki Peto’s “Migrant Worker’s Children,” Peto Student Projects)

Discussion Questions

What prejudices does Iselda have to deal with? What stereotypes of migrant workers have you heard about? How can prejudice and stereotyping undermine the human dignity and the self-image of migrant children?

Do you think her family will be able to “stop coming back” to the fields for work? What kind of help and support would they need to find a better way to provide for the family? What is needed to change the labor conditions of migrant workers? How does helping them contribute to the common good as well as promote human dignity?

Do you think Iselda will attain her dream of becoming a lawyer? (Hispanic females have the lowest rate of college enrollment and graduation of any minority subgroup.) What obstacles does she have to overcome to be a professional? What and who could help her overcome these obstacles so that she could contribute her talents to the community?
Fact Sheet
Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989. It is built on the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1959. The Convention is the most comprehensive statement of children’s rights and it is backed up with the force of international law.

All children have:

- The right to equality regardless of race, color, sex, religion or nationality.
- The right to a name and nationality.
- The right to develop physically and mentally in a healthy manner.
- The right to adequate housing, nutrition and medical services.
- The right to free primary school education.
- The right to rest and play.
- The right to special care and treatment if disabled.
- The right to be protected in times of war and conflict.
- The right to be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.
- The right to be protected from work and anything that may interfere with education or be harmful to their health.
- The right of indigenous children to enjoy their own culture, religion and language.
- The right to express an opinion in matters affecting the child and to have that opinion heard.
- The right to love, understanding and protection.
- The right not be separated from parents unless for the child’s well-being and to be able to leave and enter any country to maintain contact with parents.
- The right to be among the first to receive aid and relief in times of disaster.

All young people under 18 years of age are covered by the Convention, unless their country allows them to vote at an earlier age.

To learn more about the Convention on the Rights of the child, go to the UNICEF Web Site: http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm.