Abstract

Expected to speak Spanish at home and English outside of the home, children of migrant workers navigate a linguistic environment different to that of their monolingual peers. Children and young people with immigrant parents often act as the linguistic and cultural bridges between their families and American society. As a result of my personal experiences and my involvement with the local Western New York migrant farmworker population, I decided to ask the question; how do children of migrant farmworkers navigate language barriers between themselves and the adults in their lives? I sought to answer this question in regards to the young people’s relationships with influential adults in their lives. By means of recorded interviews and surveys, I am currently in the process of looking deeper into the relationships between first generation youth, their parents, and their teachers. Following the completion of this project, I hope to highlight the experiences and needs of immigrants and children located in the Western New York area.

Research Question

The linguistic dichotomy experienced by the children of immigrants requires them to alter their forms of communication between parents and teachers. Most frequently, these minors lose a degree of fluency in the language that is least prestigious in the society they exist in (Ahearn 2012). Language usage is influenced by the perceptions of others, especially from those in a authority. This means that children’s ideas about language are influenced by their teacher’s beliefs regarding languages and language use (Razfar 2012). Often, when children are not completely fluent in English, they will “pass”, or pretend to understand more than they actually do, in order to fit in better with their peers (Monzo and Rueda 2009). First generation minors are also aware of their positions within white public space due to their roles as linguistic and cultural mediators (Reynolds and Orellana 2009). As a result, relationships in the contexts of family members and educators are different than that of someone who speaks the same language in both situations. Consequently, I decided to ask the research question; how do the children of migrant farm workers navigate language barriers between themselves and other adults in their lives?

Methodology

Currently, I am seeking to answer my research question by conducting in person, semi-structured and recorded interviews with migrant farmworkers and their children in the location of the parent’s choosing. In order to obtain the teachers’ perspectives, surveys will be distributed and answers will be obtained via email.

Recording Equipment used: ZOOM H1 Handy Recorder

Participants were initially recruited from a local, grassroots, farmworker led organization called Alianza Agrícola located in Western New York. Additionally, the snowball sampling technique is also being employed for the purpose of participant recruitment.

Discussion

As I am able to move forward in my research, recorded interviews will be transcribed, coded and analyzed for patterns, trends and general conclusions. Limitations to my research include time constraints and building rapport. Building rapport with interviewees is very important in regards to the type and length of answers that interviewees provide for questions. If the parent and young person are not comfortable opening up and speaking to me, then their interview responses will reflect the discomfort and hesitation.

Preliminary trends that I have come across while conducting my interviews are; the role of minors as translators for their parents and the feelings associated with that role, and perceptions regarding teachers and what they, as outsiders, are allowed to know about the family and what they are not.

I have noted the second trend across different individuals, where the young person will fondly talk about their teacher, but then sternly dictate clear boundaries in regards to what information is acceptable for their teachers to know about their families.

I look forward to the continuation of this project, and aim to highlight the experiences of immigrant farmworkers and their families as a marginalized population. Further, I aim to add to the discussion surrounding legislation within New York State that would be beneficial to this group of people.

References


Background

The existence of trade agreements such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and its extension CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) lead to the displacement of people from Mexico and Central America to the United States in search of a better life (Holmes 2013, 25). Many immigrants located in Western and Central New York work in dairy farms, as the dairy industry is extensive in New York State (Fox, Fuentes, Valdez, Purser, and Sexsmith 2017). Farms are located in rural areas, which create an isolating environment for immigrant families without access to driver’s licenses living in them.

Migrant farmworkers often exist in the U.S. with limited English fluency. As a result, when first generation children begin their education, they act as a linguistic bridge between their families and the outside world, acting as translators in a variety of contexts (Reynolds and Orellana 2009). Children are active participants in their language socialization, and are aware of their language uses as well as the language beliefs surrounding any given language (Ahearn 2012, 57). In the U.S., English has a high social status, as it is used in all official environments, whereas Spanish is perceived as a language with lower status (Hill 1998). Coupled with an acute understanding of the social status and perceptions surrounding the languages they speak, the intermediate role played by first generation minors affects the ways in which they interact with the world around them (Ahearn 2012, 57).

Pictured: First Interviewee’s Parent (left) and Researcher (right)