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## And It Happened to Me

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# And It Happened to Me

Joe R. Chapel

## **Abstract**

You should know Ignacio, Maria, Petunia and Pedro—especially Pedro. Because of my involvement with the teaching of migrant children this summer I was able to become acquainted with them, to work with them, and to fall in love with them. Many of the people who participated in this program no longer abide by exigencies of the middle class, in utter oblivion to the migrant children's needs and to their worth.

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You should know Ignacio, Maria, Petunia and Pedro—especially Pedro. Because of my involvement with the teaching of migrant children this summer I was able to become acquainted with them, to work with them, and to fall in love with them. Many of the people who participated in this program no longer abide by exigencies of the middle class, in utter oblivion to the migrant children's needs and to their worth.

This last summer Western Michigan University conducted a seven-week program in the Benton Harbor area, designed to give the migrant workers' children some help in learning to adjust to regular school life. Teaching reading and the necessary enhancement of experiential background made up the core of the program.

Pedro's eyes talk to you. They are enormous and black, and they say more than Pedro ever says. Not that Pedro is the strong, silent type. He is fluent in two languages—three if you count the emotional language of his eyes. Pedro is six and a half, and he wouldn't come up to your belt buckle, but his shoulders are out to here, and his whole body exudes a devil-may-care attitude that is typical of his family. He and his folks are members of a minority group known as Migrant Farm Workers. There are 500,000 of them in the United States, and the bulk of this group is, like Pedro, Mexican American. Lately the American Negro has flooded its ranks, however, the migrant farm worker and fruit picker is still more often from Mexico than from anywhere else.

Thus the children at our school were predominantly Mexican with a minority of Negro children and "Anglos." Apparently the Negroes who are leaving the southern cotton fields are finding a precarious niche for themselves in the migrant communities. They seldom live in the same camps. The Mexicans are the elite of the group usually but the children appear to accept each other with no evidence of "prejudice." In general, however, the Mexican children appear to have better self images than either of the other ethnic groups. They make friends more easily and relate faster—especially on a superficial level—with the teachers. However, there are more Negro children who quietly cling to a teacher.

The migrants live a sort of structured gypsy life. They own cars and wash tubs and balls and bats. Most migrants have one good outfit of clothes—even the children. They are clannish and fiercely

loving of members of their own families. The Mexicans especially are an anomaly. They will greet you as their equal, and they will not apologize for the usual squalor in which they live. They will chat with you—in *your* native tongue, since you cannot converse in theirs. They will hold your hand or pat you if they like you; in short they will act as though the world is giving them a fair shake, and yet on close, careful, examination you find that they think very poorly of themselves in terms of their ability to learn in our middle class educational system.

It was an emotional experience during the recruiting phase of the program to meet with the mothers and fathers in the camps. They greeted us with broad smiles that were somehow even more compelling because of all of their missing teeth. These parents were invariably courteous, and this courtesy warmed up into enthusiasm as we explained our purpose. It was also gratifying to see that the farmers and fruit growers, the migrant employers, were eager to help these people. In most cases they did all they could to make the physical facilities acceptable and to encourage formal education for all of the migrant children and young adults.

We made an attempt to enlist the cooperation of school authorities and the citizens of the district. Both of these groups were invited to our family night gatherings. Besides the children themselves and their parents, the farmers and their families came, as did many school administrators. The assistant superintendent, school principals, the elementary supervisor, and the director of transportation attended these family affairs.

More important even than this acceptance by the community was the effect our program had on the migrant children. They proved their interest by coming to school every day. They were proud of what they were accomplishing and so were their parents. We were proud of their successes, too.

One of the five centers conducted by Western Michigan University was at Pearl School, and a typical day there began at seven in the morning when two big yellow school buses began their morning runs. Covering a distance of 45 miles round trip and traveling within a radius of 20 miles from the school, each bus returned with a load of sleepy-eyed children ranging from six to ten years of age, eager to begin another day.

Breakfast was served to the children as soon as they arrived. Teachers were present during meals to chat informally with the children and to set an example for appropriate table manners. This

was also a time when the children talked about their families, what they enjoyed doing, and some of their experiences at home and at school.

Each of the three rooms was engaged in some form of reading or writing activity by 9:00 every morning. After lunch the youngsters were allowed to go outside on the playground for supervised games and individual play. A rest period followed this, and then in the afternoons there were varied activities. By 4:00 in the afternoon the buses were ready to take the children back to their camps.

The language experience approach for teaching reading was employed. During the reading and writing sessions every morning, each room had its own activity. The older children were divided into two groups according to their level of reading. During one session, one group discussed the pictures of characters in the story they were about to read—their expressions and possible reasons why they felt as they did. They read the first page to themselves, and the teacher asked questions and encouraged the children to find answers. Most of the youngsters in the front row responded readily and were anxious to answer questions; others were still. Reading aloud seemed to capture the attention of more children than when they were reading silently. After the story had been read, questions were written on the blackboard pertaining to it. More individual guidance and encouragement was given to the group at this time as they worked on their own. The children seemed eager to answer the questions correctly.

The more advanced group worked almost entirely alone at the outset of their lesson, looking up words in the dictionary that were most difficult from a story they had read. When they had finished, these words were written on flash cards and individuals were asked to use them in a sentence. Everyone wrote the words again. There was a brief discussion of each word in which the children eagerly participated.

Almost every child in the older group could write, so they were often asked to write stories on their own about trips they had taken, hobbies they enjoyed, or anything about themselves. Most of the children were busy and could work quite well individually, although some had to be encouraged and given ideas to write about. Then they were given manila paper on which to draw pictures of what they had written. Teachers helped with words the children could not spell. When everyone had finished their stories and pictures, teachers asked for volunteers to read. Some wanted to read in front of the class; others were hesitant and needed some coaxing. Reinforcement

was given by the teachers, and an obvious willingness to participate resulted.

On another occasion these children had a fellow classmate who was in the hospital, so they decided to cheer her up and send home-made get well cards. Papers were given to each child. They were shown how to fold them, and they were asked to use bright colored crayons to draw pictures and to write a message. The teacher in charge handled the children very well and instilled enthusiasm in them when they worked on this project.

Filmstrips also were shown which gave each child a chance to read aloud or to contribute to the discussion. "This Is You" and "Your Five Senses" which were produced by Walt Disney kept the attention of the entire group. Excellent question-and-answer periods took place, and it appeared that learning was taking place. The teacher showing these films was constantly on the alert for words in the film which were unfamiliar to these children, and she made sure they were understood. The "pre-primer" and "reading readiness" children had lessons which were geared to their age and level of achievement during reading and writing sessions. Emphasis was placed upon experience charts. The children at Pearl School were given instruction in arithmetic. The goal for all the age groups was one of practical application of simple arithmetic skills.

One of the primary objectives of the school was an attempt to enrich their inadequate mental content and experiential background. Many interesting and educational field trips were taken during the seven-week period of school. One of the most enjoyable was the result of an invitation from the Western Michigan University Campus School in Kalamazoo which was also involved in a program of teaching educationally disadvantaged children. When they arrived, the children were divided into groups according to age and were then escorted to separate rooms. Each child was introduced to a Campus School student who became his "buddy," and the children became acquainted with each other. After a mid-morning snack of popsicles, some of the Campus School children put on a play for the entire group. A songfest was held afterward, and the children from both schools shared songs they had learned.

Other trips included visits to Kellogg's in Battle Creek, Windmill Island in Holland, the Tip-Top Bakery in Benton Harbor, the Hartford Fair, and the YWCA pool in St. Joseph.

One of the teachers at Pearl School had a first-hand experience with her children which must be reported, "This morning I literally

lugged into class one weighty box of sand and my prize starfish, one that I had captured myself a few years back. Several of the boys had been asking about starfish and I happened to mention that I had one, so naturally I knew I would have no peace until I managed to come forth with it. As I was carrying everything into the room before the children arrived, I got one of my rare, spur-of-the-moment ideas. I thought that maybe instead of just showing the starfish, we could all have some fun with him and that the children could have an opportunity to be creative. With this in mind I took the box of sand, laid the starfish in the center, and then proceeded to cover the box with a huge blanket. I must admit it was most "mysterious." After all of the children were in the room I told them that I had something special and very "mysterious" but instead of just showing it, we were going to go up one by one and put our hand in and see if we could tell what the contents of the box were by just feeling. After each had had a turn they were given a sheet of paper and were to draw what they had felt—and not to say a word to anyone.

"The children reacted much more than I had anticipated. They were extremely excited and could hardly wait for their turn. As they came up, some of them were fearful but none could leave without trying at least once. Some of them would cautiously stick their hand in and immediately jump back. One little girl even said that something in there bit her; yet she wanted to feel it again. By this time, imaginations were running wild. Some of them carefully drew the texture they felt; others attempted to reproduce the shape. Almost all of the work was creative and very perceptive."

One general reaction throughout the teaching staff was that the children did not display any particular discrimination against each other. They played together and fought each other as all children do, without regard for race or color. We had our share of "scrappers," but many friendships evolved from the summer school experience between Negro, Spanish, and "Anglo" children.

It was evident that other definite changes took place in the behavior of certain individual students. For example, a little Mexican boy named Ricardo was extremely hostile during the first two weeks that school was in session. He seemed to be hyperactive, very uncooperative and misbehaving much of the time to gain attention and recognition. Apparently, Ricardo wanted to prove that he was a bad boy, after being told this by so many people. Ricardo felt he was not an American but "only a Mexican," and his self-concept suffered because of this belief. When he was convinced by the teachers that

he had good qualities which were acceptable and that his unacceptable behavior would be ignored and rejected, Richardo began to feel worthwhile. He still had setbacks, but he came a long way in the seven weeks of school.

Two family nights were held during the school session and both were successful. All parents and relatives were invited, and there was a large turnout both times. Many examples of the children's work decorated the school. There were murals painted of the trips taken, pictures of the school drawn by the students, interesting bulletin board displays, and other art work shown. As a follow-up to their trip to the bakery, one room baked bread the day before family night and served it to the parents who were present. The children were excited and pleased with their baking.

A program was presented by the children on both family night occasions. The youngsters sang songs they had been rehearsing for days. They recited poetry, did some choral readings, and showed a few tumbling stunts. The children seemed to enjoy showing their parents some of the activities of summer school, and the parents seemed proud and happy when their children were on stage.

The growth on the part of our Western Michigan University participants was in the most part spectacular. These people had read about the migrant child and had some notion of what these children were like, but really didn't know them until they were given the opportunity to be with them daily and to visit in their camps. Our teachers learned to love these children. As the day came when we had to bid farewell to them, all of us were sadly reluctant to see them go.

Growth in education is something we always talk about. This summer we saw it actually occur. It happened to everyone connected with the program—the children, their parents, the community, and the teachers. And it happened to me.