

18-B Migrant Mother, 1936

Dorothea Lange (1895–1965)



18-B Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), *Migrant Mother* (Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California), February 1936. Black-and-white photograph. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information, Photograph Collection. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

The Art

This black-and-white photograph was taken in the 1930s during the Great Depression. The family is living outdoors with other people who are trying to get work picking peas. Two of the children are leaning on their mother with their heads turned away from the camera. A baby rests in her lap. Their clothes are torn and worn out. This picture became famous because it tells a very serious story about traveling farmers, known as migrant farmers or migrant workers. When the picture was first printed in newspapers, it made people think about how hard the lives of migrant farmers really were.

The Artist

Dorothea Lange was one of the very few well-known female photographers during this time in American history. She was known for taking pictures that made people think about things that affected them and their communities. Lange traveled around California with her mind set on finding a way to show how hard the lives of migrant workers were. She also wanted to reveal their pride, strength, and spirit.

The Historical Perspective

This picture was taken in 1936 during the Great Depression, when times were very hard. The system that controlled the country's money was failing. Many farm workers were so poor they could barely feed their families. But as a result of this picture and others, the government responded by sending 20,000 pounds of food to California migrant workers.



Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage the children to look closely at the photograph and talk about the feelings of the mother and children. Ask questions, introduce new vocabulary, and find books that relate to the photograph.

Describing



- ✓ What is the first thing you notice in this photograph?
- ✓ Take a look at the mother's face. Is she a happy mother? Do you see the lines on her forehead? Does she look worried?
- ✓ What kind of clothes is the mother wearing? How many children do you see?

Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- Look at the children. It is hard to see their faces. The face of the baby on the mother's lap shows the baby sleeping. How many of you have a baby at home? Do you think these two children wished they could sleep on their mother's lap too? When you don't want to smile for a camera, how do you feel? Are you tired?
- How do you act when you are hungry? Do you think the children feel hungry or tired? Are they looking away because they feel shy?
- Many people were so poor their cupboards were empty and they had no food in their refrigerator. Parents would worry if they would have enough food to eat one time each day. How many times do you eat each day?

Connecting and Extending

Introducing Vocabulary

| | |
|-----------|----------|
| comfort | ragged |
| depressed | sore |
| exhausted | staring |
| filthy | starving |
| hopeless | tattered |
| hungry | worried |



Books

Going Home by Eve Bunting (J. Cotler, 1996)

A child whose family has moved from Mexico to California comes to appreciate the sacrifices his parents made so they could live better lives.

Lights on the River by Jane Resh Thomas (Hyperion Books for Children, 1994)

A young girl's memories of Christmas in Mexico with her grandmother help her cope with life as a migrant worker.

P is for Peanut: A Photographic ABC by Lisa Gelber and Jody Roberts (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007)

A black-and-white photograph from the J. Paul Getty collection represents each letter of the alphabet.

Books continued on page 115



Connecting and Extending continued...

Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can:

- ✓ look at family pictures and talk about the expressions on people's faces.
- ✓ sing "Rock a Bye Baby" while holding dolls and/or stuffed animals.
- ✓ talk about what migrant workers do and how they live.



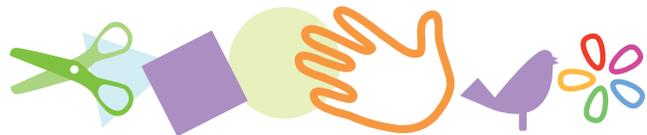
Books continued...

Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farm Workers Tell Their Stories by S. Beth Atkin (Little Brown Young Readers, 2000)

Interviews, poems, and photographs describe the lives of migrant children.

Working Cotton by Shirley Anne Williams (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992)

The author relates her experiences as a young girl to depict life as a migrant worker in the cotton fields.



Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Bring pea pods to the classroom and allow the children to open them to see how peas are grown. What makes plants grow? Bring a can of peas to demonstrate how many peas it takes to fill a can. What is the difference between the fresh and canned peas? How do they look? Feel?
- ✓ Discuss migrant farm workers, where they come from, and how they live as they travel from place to place looking for work.
- ✓ Discuss feelings and emotions. Since there are children in the picture, you can discuss how they might feel. If their mom is sad, how do they know, and how do they feel? And how is it different when she's happy?
- ✓ Invite a photographer with a professional camera to the classroom. Demonstrate how a picture can be taken without a person knowing. Compare that to the experience of a picture taken with the person's knowledge. Invite children to bring photos of themselves and their families. Talk in individual, small, or large groups about the pictures and the feelings portrayed by the faces.
- ✓ Another picture in the *Picturing America* series, *The Veteran in the Field*, shows a man harvesting wheat. Compare and contrast these two images. Discuss the differences between harvesting peas (as discussed above) and cutting wheat.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children's learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children's learning related to the "A Head Start on Picturing America" artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.