STUDENT MOBILITY: MOVING BEYOND DEFICIT VIEWS

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This paper discusses issues that relate to student mobility and implications for teachers and guidance officers. Whilst there has been a tendency to locate problems associated with mobility in the children themselves or in their families, it is argued that this is not a particularly productive approach. Taking lessons from recent literacy understandings and using data from a study about the children of itinerant fruit pickers, this paper takes a broader perspective, recommending that school personnel widen their focus to include an examination of school practices and to consider equity implications for mobile students.

Mobility and educational implications

Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] internal migration data (1999) show that the Australian population is highly mobile. Although information about the numbers of children changing schools is not readily available, the ABS reported that in 1999 alone 358,401 people moved interstate and 12.6 per cent (45,327) of these were school age children between the ages of five and 14 years (ABS, 1999). If students who move schools intrastate and those over 14 years of age were added to these figures, it would appear that student mobility is a significant issue for schools and educational systems.

Despite the evidence of the mobility of Australian school students, educational itinerancy has not been widely researched. However, in much of the research that is available, mobility has been perceived as having a negative impact on children and their school experiences. Research in Australia and the United States, for example, has argued that, for students, itinerancy may result in disrupted social and academic development (Birch & Lally, 1994; Fields, 1995, 1997a, 1997b), low self-esteem, insecurity, irritability and poor peer relations (Audette, Algozzine, & Warden, 1993; Welch, 1987), lower achievement levels (Evans, 1996; Pribesh & Downey, 1999), grade retention (Rahmani, 1985), and high school dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

In Australia, a number of publications have made suggestions and recommendations to assist families (e.g. Linke, 2000; Queensland Department of Education Northern Region Townsville, 1992c) and schools (Curriculum Corporation, 1998; Queensland Department of Education Northern Region Townsville, 1992a, 1992b) with mobility issues. In an earlier

issue of this journal, Fields (1997b) reviewed a selection of programs and argued that educators should focus on policy development, remedial instruction and counselling.

Whilst these publications offer concrete and potentially useful strategies, many of the recommendations are framed in a manner that locates "the problem" in the mobile children themselves and/or their families. This probably results from the way that most of the research on educational itinerancy has either focused on the effects of mobility on children's psychological, biological or academic development (as identified in the list of above) or implied that families' choice of an itinerant lifestyle is at fault (e.g. Bracey, 1991). Both views of mobility tend to juxtapose mobile and residentially-stable students and take the positivist perspective that the world can be interpreted in terms of cause and effect relationships (Denzin, 1994).

As a result, there has been a tendency, often an implicit one, to blame the children or their parents for their itinerancy and the negative impact on children's educational achievement. Fields' (1997b) recommendation for remedial instruction, for example, assumes that the problem lies in the children and that the school can remedy that problem.

Yet the questioning of such approaches is not new. Owen (1997) identified that it is easy for mobile children to be "treated in a victim blaming way" and advocated the need for "sensible means" (p.3) to deal with the consequences of mobility. In their critique of one of Fields' articles

(1995), Danaher and Danaher (2000) advocated that assumptions about the educationally-disabling nature of mobility are better replaced by understandings of diversity and "a more inclusive and less discriminatory approach to educational provision for all people" (p.28).

Few researchers have examined positive effects of being mobile. In fact, Pribesh and Downey (1999) could not identify any group for whom moving proved to be consistently beneficial and Lash and Kirkpatrick (1990) reported that the teachers they interviewed did not expect generally to be questioned about the positive effects of working with mobile students. The work by Danaher and others about Queensland show children and circus children (e.g. Danaher, 1998; Danaher & Danaher, 2000; Wyer, Danaher, Kindt, & Moriarty, 1997; Wyer, Danaher, Rowan, & Hallinan, 1998), however, has been an exception. They have recognised that show children visit places see events and live in ways that most children only ever read about or in some other ways experience vicariously. Show children live the "inside story" of the travelling show person and they know all the intricacies that such a life entails. (Moriarty, Danaher, & Hallinan, 1996, p.2).

Reconceptualising our thinking about student mobility
Recent educational policy and strategy documents (e.g. Education Queensland, 1999; Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999; Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999) call for teachers and

schools to be socially just, to overcome barriers to access and participation, and to ensure that all students have access to learning opportunities and equitable learning outcomes. Teachers are encouraged to identify, acknowledge and accept children's diversity, especially in relation to their home backgrounds, instead of taking up deficit discourses. As Allen (2001) explains, teachers should be questioning "whether there is anyone in our schools and classrooms who is marginalised, whose voice cannot be heard, whose culture has to be left at the school gate" (p.150).

In view of these current approaches to social justice, there is a need to rethink attitudes towards student mobility. Danaher and Danaher (2000) suggest that it is essential to move away from the view that mobility is "an unfortunate 'problem' that must be 'solved' or 'escaped'" (p.28).

A possible solution lies in recent literature about literacy. Hill and her colleagues (1998), in their 100 children go to school study, use a "wide lens" metaphor to explain the emphasis of socio-cultural approaches to literacy. The wide lens allows literacy and learning to be examined within their cultural, institutional and interactional contexts. This means that individuals are located within social groups and social practices, thereby broadening the focus to include social dimensions as well as cognitive and linguistic ones.

This approach allows movement away from a psychological view, where literacy practices are "individualised, cognitive

and, therefore, largely unobservable" (Teacher Education Working Party, 2001, p.7), towards a broader perspective that opens up institutional, social and cultural practices for examination. As Alloway and Gilbert (1998) suggested, the question can move from asking "what is wrong with the individual child" to asking "what is wrong with schooling practices" (p.259).

Education Queensland's Literate Futures document (Queensland Department of Education, 2000) offers a similar suggestion, arguing that teachers and schools should be focusing on the things over which they have some control. In other words, instead of blaming children and their parents for the difficulties they experience, teachers should turn their attention to classroom pedagogy, to ensure "effective, research-based and balanced pedagogy . . . for diverse student bodies" (Queensland Department of Education, 2000, p.65).

The application of this approach to the issue of student mobility opens up the range of explanations that are available and provides an opportunity to move beyond deficit views. To illustrate how a perspective that incorporates social and cultural contexts can present a more productive way of investigating students' mobility, this paper draws on data from a study of the educational experiences of itinerant fruit pickers' children.

The research
During 2000 and 2001, the research focused on six itinerant families who travelled to the North Queensland town of

Harbourton (a pseudonym) for the winter harvesting season. Approximately 100 children enrol in Harbourton's schools during the annual harvest. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children and their parents, the children's teachers and other school personnel. The case study approach provided opportunities for the voices of families to be heard alongside those of personnel within an educational institution.

Diversity

The diversity of the six families revealed that it is impossible to make assumptions about the lifestyles of itinerant fruit pickers' families or about their children's education. The families differed in ethnicity — two were Tongan, two were from New Zealand, and two were Turkish. However, categorisation into these groups masked other detail about the families. The two Tongan families, for example, differed in the lengths of time they had been in Australia, in the lengths of time they had experienced itinerant and residentially-stable lifestyles, and in their reasons for doing seasonal work. One family had worked as itinerant fruit pickers since their arrival in Australia and their children had moved school every year of their school lives. In contrast, the other Tongan family had lived a sedentary lifestyle in Sydney until early 2000, when they made the decision to try rural life.

Similar differences existed amongst the other families. One of the Turkish families regarded their fruit picking as a two-year working holiday, allowing them to spend time with relatives who resided in North Queensland. One of the New Zealand families had been sedentary fruit pickers in New Zealand and was operating on a three-year plan of working in Australia. The family was very proud that they had paid an additional $16,000 off their house mortgage in the first six months of their plan.

Overall, the families had few things in common. However, they had all converged on Harbourton to pick vegetables during the North Queensland winter and would move south, either to New South Wales or Victoria, to pick fruit or vegetables during summer. For their children, changing schools also meant moving home, moving states, and moving from one educational system to another. In most other respects, the families differed.

Teachers' views

When interviewed, the teachers' discussion focused on a range of issues. Foremost amongst these was what the teachers identified as the education system's inability to staff and resource the school on projected seasonal enrolments. The school's principal and teachers were of the belief that their school was treated inequitably by the education system. Historical data show that the school's enrolments fluctuate in line with the annual harvesting season, as the school's population is always at its smallest in February, begins to increase around April or May as the harvesting season begins, and reaches its maximum size at the peak of the harvesting season in August or September. During this period, the school's population usually increases by around seven to ten per cent. The education system, however, bases schools' staffing allocations on

an enrolment census that is conducted in early February, when that particular school records its lowest enrolments.

Teachers were also concerned that the arrival of additional students meant that resources were expected to be shared amongst a much larger group of students. The principal acknowledged that "There's always the thought of – Are we dragging money away from our twelve monthers? You know, like our kids that stay here all the time." Although the principal concluded that "there's always that thought, even though we don't. We always say, no, they're kids at our school too," it seems that it might be very easy for school discourses to make a distinction between itinerant students and the rest of the school population.

This view, where residentially-stable children are seen as the "norm", was carried through into teachers' discussions about the children's school achievements. An examination of the students' school reports indicated that itinerant children were distributed across the full range of achievement levels, although literacy was one area where the children's results tended to be in the satisfactory or lower categories of achievement. Teachers generally thought that achievement was affected by an itinerant lifestyle. For example, one teacher explained that there was probably a lack of books at home, "because they're itinerant, I imagine what they bring is what they can fit in the car."

There also seemed to be some concern that increased social problems coincided with the itinerant children's arrival in the school. The principal explained that "I don't want to stereotype itinerant pickers into a low socio-economic category where social problems seem to manifest, but we do seem to have more than our fair share of social problems."

Approximately 85 per cent of the itinerant children came from non-English speaking backgrounds and the principal commented that "When we talk of itinerants, I mean straight away I seem to think of ESL [English as a Second Language], a major problem." One teacher thought that the difficulties experienced by one child "might mean that his parents aren't helping him choose books in English," whilst another teacher argued that parents from non-English speaking backgrounds often do the wrong thing when they encourage the children to speak English at home.

Taking a wider view
It was evident from the teachers' discussions that they focused on two main aspects when talking about itinerant children. On the one hand, they looked at the education system's approach to staffing and resourcing and the associated difficulties for their school, and on the other hand, they located problems in the children and their parents. In both cases, they focused on things that were mostly beyond their control, rather than identifying ways of improving the school's capacity to cope with the annual influx of itinerant children. There appeared to be no consideration of whether the school and its practices created barriers to equitable learning outcomes.

In contrast, the children and their parents

talked about the different school contexts that the children entered and exited, as well as about their home contexts, where educational issues were one of many considerations that related to their itinerancy. The parents' and children's stories about mobility differed from those told by the teachers. All of the parents wanted their children to do well at school and they were generally cognisant of the difficulties that were caused by moving in and out of different schools and different state education systems.

Parents identified broken friendships as a source of grief for their children and many of the parents encouraged their children to maintain contact with children in other towns. In general, the families attempted to buffer their children from the effects of moving.

The children recognised that they often repeated school work that they done in a previous school. Parents articulated similar concerns. For example, one parent said:

I mean, the syllabus of Victoria and Queensland, is it the same or different? . . . And I'm not sure that they [are] going [to] come in starting where they finished from [in] Victoria, whether they start on the same thing here or they miss out some of, you know what I mean.

Some families reported feeling guilty about interrupting their children's schooling. One parent, whose son had experienced some difficulty settling into his new school, explained that "I feel responsible. I do. I feel responsible." The parents tend-

ed to blame themselves for any problems that their children experienced. Not one parent identified problems with the school.

Decisions about when to move from place to place were not made lightly and parents often found themselves trying to balance educational, financial and/or family welfare concerns. As well, families operated within a context of uncertainty. Seasonal horticultural work is dependent upon factors such as the weather and market prices, factors that are out of their control. When the harvesting season finishes well before the end of the school year, some parents are faced with having to decide whether they move on to the summer season in the south or whether they survive without income until their children finish the school year in Queensland.

Implications for school personnel

By taking a wider view, considering the social and cultural contexts of families and examining the multiple educational contexts and home contexts that they experienced, the picture of itinerant families became a richer and more complex one. Such an approach offers opportunities to move beyond deficit discourses and blame, towards an understanding of the educational difficulties and dilemmas experienced by mobile families.

The parents' interviews offered insights into the contexts within which they lived and worked. Parents were concerned with their children's education, but other family matters also played a major role in their work-related decisions. The diversity displayed amongst the families raised serious

questions about the assumptions that proliferated in the school. A challenge for the school is to find ways to celebrate this diversity and to use it positively.

There is no doubt that there is work to be done in trying to ease some of the difficulties that are experienced by mobile students. However, there seems to be a tendency for teachers' understandings about mobility to remain separate from those of the children and their parents. Opportunities and space are needed for classroom teachers and other school personnel to talk with the families of mobile children about their experiences and to develop some shared understandings about mobility and how it relates to the children's schooling.

Locating the problem in the children and their parents is not necessarily a productive approach, because it tends to narrow the range of possible explanations and assume that school practices are not implicated in any way. Mobile children and their parents are well placed to identify some of the problems that they experience. This does not mean shifting blame to schools and teachers. What it does mean is opening up opportunities for discussion and broadening the range of explanations on offer.

Instead of asking how they can "fix up" mobile students, schools need to address the more difficult issues of how they can work with mobile families to ensure stress-free transitions between schools and equitable learning outcomes for students. Working with teachers, parents and students, guidance officers can play a crucial

role in this broader approach. Although counselling and program implementation may still be necessary, the greatest challenge may be in changing the way student mobility is conceptualised.

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