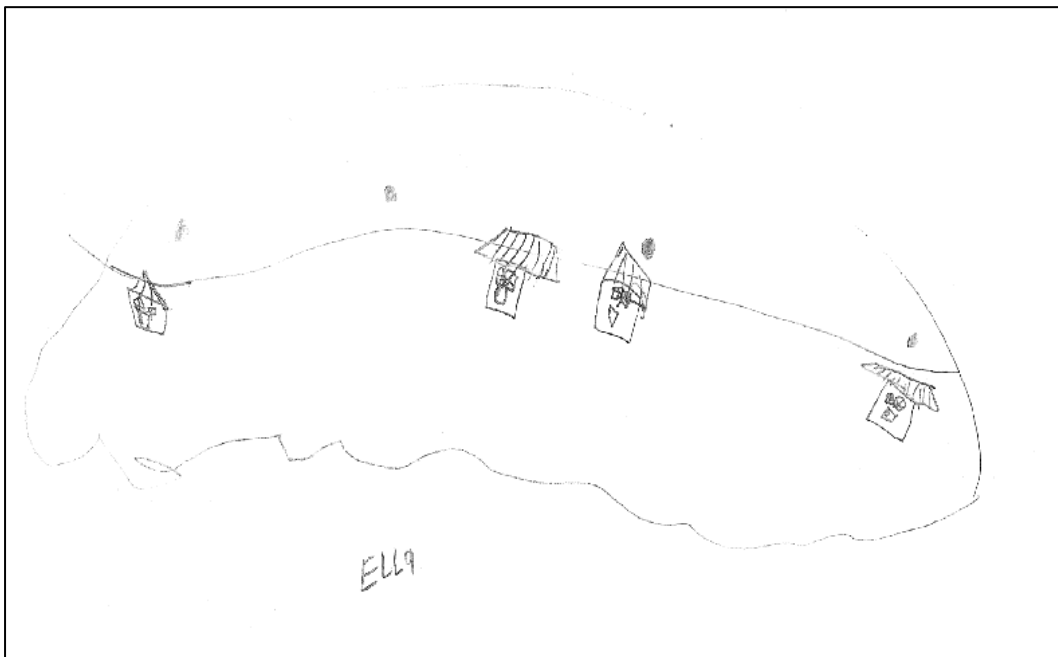


Seeking continuity: educational strategy in and for mobile ADF families



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1. Introduction

Mobility is often required for Australian Defence Force (ADF) members to achieve career advancement. Relocations within Australia and perhaps internationally can be expected every 2-4 years (Department of Defence, 2008). The illustration on the cover succinctly represents the challenge for ADF members' families – it is a 'map' drawn by a preschool child in an ADF member's family, showing where she has lived in Australia – four homes in her four years, and presumably more to come. Meanwhile, schooling as an institution has historically been built around the assumption of stability, that is, 'permanently resident children attending the same school' (Kenny & Danaher, 2009, p.1). These contradictory institutional facts of ADF members' family life can present significant challenges when it comes to negotiating transitions across career postings, and achieving continuity if not stability in their children's education.

Australia's long distances between population centres make household moves an important and stressful biographical event. In addition, Australia's educational landscape is divided into state jurisdictions, each operating its own schooling system, with different curriculum, pedagogical and assessment regimes. While Australia is working towards a national curriculum and benchmark testing, mobile families at this stage wear the brunt of any discontinuities across state boundaries. These systemic discontinuities between public institutions are lived as individualised private troubles - disruptions and issues in the individual child's learning trajectory - hence often generate additional anxieties around household relocations.

Where the local school used to serve as the default school choice, schools are now encouraged to differentiate themselves in the market, and parents are encouraged to shop around and choose a school according to particular needs and preferences. Ironically, under such 'choice policy', popular schools often resort to zoning their catchment or to waiting lists to manage the enrolment pressure from their popularity. Thus when and where you live can become important determinants of whether or not you can enrol your children in your school of choice. Such considerations rely on local knowledge that mobile families may not have access to, or residential stability that ADF families cannot presume. Thus choice policies and marketisation practices such as zoning, waiting lists and booking fees can add more complexity to relocation decisions.

The ADF acknowledges this load on families through relocation allowances and a rich raft of support services through its ancillary Defence Community Organisation (DCO). Similarly schools located close to major ADF bases have developed practices, roles, routines and experience to meet the educational needs of the mobile family. These services, families and schools have built up expertise around transitions from which others could benefit as Australians in general become more mobile in the pursuit of better life opportunities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Hugo, 2007). ADF families have the certainty of a job, a salary and support services when they relocate. Many other, less visible mobile families will not have these assurances or buffers, and will be more reliant on the school to facilitate their educational transitions.

This report shares findings and insights from an interview study conducted in 2009, with 34 ADF families. These families were identified in the communities of primary schools in both state and Catholic systems with high ADF family enrolments in 3 towns across 2 states, with the assistance of the DCO and their embedded Defence School Transition Aides (DSTAs). In the interviews the parents were invited to describe their history of ADF relocations, and how they managed transitions for each member in terms of school choice, child care arrangements, spouse employment, and educational transitions. Parallel interviews were conducted with 12 teachers and 6 DSTAs across the identified schools to describe how schools cater for mobile ADF families flowing through their classes. Parents were invited to tell the story of their family's sequence of moves and how each member made the transition, then reflect more generally on what advice they'd give other mobile families. Teachers were asked to describe how they respond to the mobile families in their school community, and to illustrate some of the issues and challenges from the institutional perspective. By offering perspectives from both parents and teachers, the report hopes to facilitate a dialogue between parties to address their common goal – promoting productive continuities in education for children in mobile families.

A core concept in the thinking behind this study has been '**motility**', which refers to the capacity, attitudes, resources and skills that make mobility possible (Kaufmann, 2002). When motility is high, families are well disposed to moving being keen and able to grasp the opportunities that moving enables. When motility is low, families find moving stressful and counterproductive, so they avoid it or defer it where possible. This concept allows the analysis to consider how families can become more motile (learning how to manage transitions, muster resources, develop new skills and so forth), or less motile (reaching new phases where moving becomes more problematic, accruing experience that deters them from moving again) over time. The distinction between motility and actual mobility means we can consider scenarios where the low motility family experiences high mobility because of circumstances not of their choosing, and how their experience will differ from the high motility family's experience of mobility. This concept will later also be adapted to describe qualities of the institutional settings in terms of how '**viscous**' their practice is, in terms of facilitating or complicating the flow the mobile families through their community.

Introducing the parent participants

The 34 families sampled were all couple families with mum, dad and the kids. The vast majority were first marriages/partnerships, and two were blended families from subsequent partnerships. The number of children at home at the time of interviewing ranged from one (3 families) to four (4 families), most having 2 or 3 children. One family household included a resident grandparent. Another had a resident au pair/babysitter. The sample did not include any single parent ADF families, for whom issues are perhaps more complicated. Parents were invited to participate in the interview together, however the majority of interviews (24) were conducted with the non-ADF member being the mother, given the extended absence of many ADF members on training exercises or active duty. All the families but one had primary school-aged children, but seven also had pre-school aged children, and five also had high school aged children. These age spreads meant that these families were often simultaneously negotiating child care, preschool, primary and secondary schooling markets, and having to reconcile these different choices into manageable family routines.

In all cases the male partner was an active ADF member. In one case both parents were working in the Defence Forces, and five other female partners had at some stage been enlisted either full time or in the reserves. Three families had transferred from the British Defence Forces hence their family careers included international moves. ADF ranks at time of interview ranged from enlisted entry level ranks (private, trooper, gunner etc) to non-commissioned officers (sergeant, petty officer, corporal, Warrant Officer) and commissioned officer ranks (Lieutenant, Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel), the majority working in the Army. These differences in rank indicate significant differences in remuneration, and thus significant differences in families' financial resources to sponsor or support educational choices.

These 34 families had already undertaken a total of 121 household moves with their children (an average of between three and four moves each, within a range of one to nine moves) of which 95 were interstate, 15 within state and 11 international. In addition, all families were anticipating more moves in the near future. This high rate and spatial range of mobility distinguishes them from the larger Australian population. In comparison, a national study of housing conducted in 2007-2008 reported that 43% of the households sampled had moved in the 5 years prior to interview, of whom only 8% had moved interstate or from overseas, 45% from a different locality or suburb, and 47% within the same locality/suburb (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

The high rate of interstate relocations is particularly significant given the different state education systems across Australia. Table 1 demonstrates the finely grained differences in arrangements and nomenclature for starting school across Australian states and schools. Institutional boundaries are drawn at slightly different cut-off points, and the devil is in the detail for these families.

It is significant that it took considerable time to assemble this information from the various education departments' public websites. Each set of guidelines is well known within its own territory, hence can be taken for granted, considered normal, right and commonsensical by those with local knowledge. In addition, there are considerable differences between states in educational philosophy and tradition, as expressed in the curriculum, assessment and pedagogical practices. However, the mobile ADF family will need to piece these details and their implications together at short notice. Mobile families will have their own histories, and may subscribe to the arrangements in the state they are most familiar with. Any other state's arrangements they encounter will be marked by the difference which disrupts what they have come to expect of schooling. Schooling in the new locale will thus be viewed not only on its own terms (what it is), but also through its relation/contrast to the previous or familiar state's arrangements (what it's not). This can make the mobile family a more informed and potentially more critical customer, given their experience and comfort with alternative frames.

This report has four sections. Firstly, the population of parent interviewees and their unique mobility histories are described. Then a summary of the parents' experiences and reflections on their children's educational transitions is offered. Then the teachers' more generalised accounts of educational strategy for mobile ADF families are presented. From this basis the final section considers what the parties might learn from each other when it comes to manufacturing educational

continuity across the institutional discontinuities they typically encounter. This section offers a theoretical schema that might help schools, parents and their support services think about the fit between mobile families' own coping strategies, and the culture of their school in its response to the needs of mobile families.

Table 1

School starting ages by Australian state/territory as at 2010

State	Pre-2	Pre-1	Year 1
QLD	Name of year	Prep	Year 1
	Age of entry	No compulsory pre-prep 5 by June 30	6 by June 30 in year they're enrolled.
NSW	Name of year	Preschool	Kindergarten (COMPULSORY)
	Age of entry	4 by 31 July	5 by 31 July
VIC	Name of year	Kindergarten	Prep
	Age of entry	4 by 30 April	5 by 30 April
TAS	Name of year	Kindergarten	Prep (COMPULSORY)
	Age of entry	4 by 1 January	5 by 1 January
ACT	Name of year	Preschool	Kindergarten
	Age of entry	4 by April 30	5 by April 30
SA	Name of year	Preschool	Reception
	Age of entry	At least 4. Intake each term	At least 5. Intake each term
WA	Name of year	Kindergarten	Pre-primary
	Age of entry	4 by June 30	5 by June 30
NT	Name of year	Preschool	Transition
	Age of entry	4 on or before June 30 (those turning 4 after June 30 may start after their birthday provided they attend preschool longer than 12 months)	5 on or before June 30.
			Child completes 11-14 terms across reception, Y1 and Y2. Generally, those starting in first term have 12 terms, those starting in second term have 11 terms, those starting in third term have 14 terms, those starting in fourth term have 13 terms
			Year 1
			6 by 30 April
			6 on or before 1 January in that year
			6 by 30 April
			6 by June 30
			6 on or before June 30

Sources accessed October 2010: ACT: http://www.det.act.gov.au/school_education/starting_school; NSW: <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/gotoschool/primary/startingschool.php>; SA: <http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/portal/community.asp?group=matters&id=startingschool>; QLD: http://education.qld.gov.au/student-services/inclusive/prep/docs/prep_info_sheet.pdf; VIC: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/preschool/default.htm>; NT: <http://www.det.nt.gov.au/parents-community/schooling/stages-of-schooling>; WA: <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/ece/enrolments.html#cal>; TAS: <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/school/parents/starting/starting-and-leaving-ages>.

2. Parents and the search for continuity

This section describes and illustrates themes that emerged across parent interviews about how they manage educational choice, strategy and transitions. The broad themes include: the work of moving in educational markets; institutional discontinuities, transitions and translations; homework for academic and social support; seeking continuity; cultivating motility; the erosion of motility; and manufacturing continuity. The report has included a wealth of such illustrative quotes, so parent readers can recognize the experiences, concerns, strategies and solutions they might share as a community, or consider other parents' solutions to similar problems, while service providers can hear the participants speak from lived experiences. The numbers following quotes indicate which participant made the remark.

The work of moving in educational markets

By the parents' reports, news of a posting is always followed by an **intense period of research** into the nature and reputation of schools in the next location, using all available means. Research into the next educational market was typically initiated at a distance, searching school webpages, phoning schools, and discussions with the DCO staff in the new locality:

I use those facilities (DCO) because they have some experience of the schools and some knowledge of them but I also go onto the internet and research the schools myself; look at their websites, phone the schools, talk to the principals, get them to send me information packs. (2)

One parent even described conducting such research on likely sites, to be ready for the inevitable posting:

We knew it was coming, we just didn't know where we were going so I prepared the boys and they helped pack up their clothes and things like that and I said we were either going to Brisbane or Darwin, that's all we knew. So I researched all the stuff in Darwin, all the stuff in Brisbane because I didn't know where we were going but I knew it was going to be one of those two. (3)

Many participants described an urgency in their research and deliberations: *'for my sake I needed to be able to tell [son] something very concrete before we moved and for [son's] sake too I think' (BSP1)*. They were keen to resolve school and housing choices as soon as possible so uncertainty could become certainty and their future life more imaginable.

The parents highly valued and actively sought the opinion of other parents: *'If you can find someone you can trust with a similar taste I would go by that first and then go onto the websites and then extend it from that' (31)*. All participants described a process of contacting friends and family to glean local knowledge about schools:

See [husband] usually does though because he's got friends...he's been in for 25 years, he's got friends everywhere...he's very active on that so when we're posted he'll email whoever's in that area and say "hey...what areas, what schools, what are the schools like?" And we do the same for other people...

we've been told don't go to this area or don't go that area or go this way and this place isn't too bad and this school's all right or stay away from this one ... (25)

This mutual trade in anecdotal 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) was frequently described as a well established practice in the extended ADF community: *'A lot of people don't mind you ringing up after 3-4 years and saying 'Hey, it's me; we're moving, what's a good school for the kids', that sort of thing. I think that's probably the most important thing – the networking'* (26). Where it might be considered an unreliable haphazard source of information, this anecdotal information from peers was considered by some to act as a correction to the careful market-oriented self-representations by schools on their websites: *'I looked on the internet and it was pretty tricky because you can't just judge a book by its cover'* (11).

Mothers in particular described themselves as 'proactive' (5) and 'very active' (3) in researching the next educational market. Such work tended to fall to the female parent, either by choice:

They're my children. I need to make sure that their best interests are being served. I've always been an at-home mum and that's my job. That's what I do. I make sure that my kids are getting the best that they can be provided with – and particularly their education is something I take very seriously (2)

or by availability, which can be difficult for the serving ADF member:

Nine times out of ten it falls on the shoulders of the parent that's left at home and they've got to cope with everything else – finding a supermarket, finding a doctor...(19)

Yeah, I try to get to the interviews as much as I could. I like to go and see the schools and the teachers when I could. I couldn't always go but yeah. (ADF father, 27)

The decision of where to live was intimately connected and entangled with the choice of school. If parents were aware of **zoning** boundaries around popular schools, housing choices were often strategically made within the boundary, to ensure the school of their choice.

And because you have these very particular catchment areas, you really have to choose, I believe, your school first and your house second ... if the schooling's important but it's not to everyone. Yeah we were able to make that choice quite easily. (30)

Other parents learnt of such zoning boundaries after their choice of house, and were either disgruntled at being later denied a place at their school of choice or considered themselves 'lucky' to fall within the boundary:

It's just by chance that we went to [name of school]. I hadn't heard anything about it. I didn't know – I'm all new to this so I didn't know how to research, I did do the whole map thing and worked out that I was only a couple of k's from the school which was good ... so we were very lucky for someone who had no idea. (32)

Well we didn't quite realise that there was [school] and [school] were so close and one side gets [school] and the other gets [school], we were just lucky enough that we picked the right side that had the school that we wanted to go to. (25)

The desirability of schools was judged according to **three broad sets of criteria – pragmatics, quality and goodness of fit**. Proximity was an important pragmatic criterion in school choices. Daily routes between home, school, child care and workplaces were major pragmatic consideration in families' reckonings and decisions. Many families expressed the ideal and the initial hope of being able to go to their nearest school to make daily commuting routes family-friendly and sustainable. Families stretched across educational sectors (child care, pre-school, primary or secondary schooling) and workplaces (one or both parents in the workforce) had to juggle possible combinations to come to a workable solution that could pragmatically accommodate all members' needs.

We chose a house and what I always do is I look at the location of things so 'Where am I going to work? Where do I want to get a job? Where does my husband work? Where do we live and what school is either closer to whichever parent is going to be the one responsible for picking up and dropping off the children? (9)

For some this entailed detailed research about bus timetables, the safety of bus interchanges and road crossings, private school bus routes, drop off and pick up times at child care centres, the presence of before and after school care, and similar details that could reconcile priorities and be assembled into a workable family routine:

I actually worked at [suburb] so it's a lot easier for me to take [son] with me and then be close to school where I am at work because if he's sick or if they've got a play on or whatever, I can just duck out whereas if he's here I've got to factor in travel time and it just doesn't work. So when they're on holidays or if he's sick I've still got to go out ... or if I'm sick I've still got to drive him out to school. (6)

While some families made proximity their priority, others prioritised other criteria:

I'd signed them up as soon as we got posting orders really, I put their names down... there was only a few schools that had the [preparatory] trials going and they were nowhere near this choice of housing which we were forced into taking....so I had to spend two and a half hours every day driving... you'd go, you'd come back, you'd go again and you'd come back again and I had to buckle in four kids... (27)

Another mother described how she was willing to drive her child to a half day pre-school program half an hour away every day of the week:

Only because I think school's important and I believe that if the child's got a good teacher to start with, then that's going to be a benefit to them. I think if they start off on real rocky ground that will be a bit of an impact on their education and how they accept other teachers and stuff. (18)

Judgements of **quality** relied heavily on word of mouth opinion.

Well I guess we would rely on whether we knew people in the area. If not then I guess we're taking a chance a little bit. (1)

Yeah, location and reputation – not necessarily Catholicism but just the reputation of the school through people that I worked with and some of the parents and that sort of thing. (6)

'Bad' reputations were built around stories of behavioural problems, bad language and bullying. 'Good' reputations were built around behavioural standards, facilities, grounds, a 'decent' area, niche programs and more generally if their friend was 'happy' with the school: *'I'd spoken to my girlfriend. She's been here three years I think and she loves it, so I thought "Okay"' (17)*. On arrival in the new locality, many parents told of conducting visits to 'check out' possible schools, and forming 'gut' opinions on the basis of the encounters they had with staff:

I went to [school] and waited 45 minutes in the front desk to book an appointment ... that was on Monday, booked an appointment for Thursday, went to the appointment on Thursday, waited an hour and a half before the deputy principal went and brought in everyone else before me and watching the antics and the frustrations in the office was enough for me to say 'I don't want my kids going here anyway'. The kids had been playing outside because obviously they couldn't sit down in the office for an hour and a half and they'd been bitten from head to toe in mozzies and I've just gone 'You've got a stagnant water problem, your office staff aren't supporting the teachers, the teachers are getting annoyed, the deputy principal hasn't lived up to his appointment' and so I just said 'Look, I'm leaving. I'm sorry'. The deputy principal ended up ringing me and apologising but in my head it was too late. (33)

First impressions often emerged as crucial for decision-making and judgements of quality. The appearance of the grounds and buildings from the street, how happy teachers and students looked coming out of class, classroom displays, and phone communications all featured as telling moments which sealed decisions.

Yeah, I look at the security of the area, I look at the friendliness of the staff, I look at the way the staff treat the children, as in how they liaise with the children, the cleanliness of the area, the supervision of children... what the kids do' (17)

Other judgements of quality were made on the basis of parents' preferences:

I look at class sizes, I look at how big the school is; I don't want a large school. I look at the schools to see whether they have combined primary school, high school because I'm not interested in having high school children going to school with my little children; I quite like the idea of separate schools and just what their motto is – I just research a little bit on .. what their ethos is, what they're trying to sell their school as (9)

In terms of **goodness of fit**, school choice was often informed by the needs of individual children, in particular those with special needs, being academic or sporting ability, behavioural disorder or cognitive/learning disability:

My eldest one at the moment, he's just sport, sport, sport, so I need to look at something that is going to provide him with the sporting as well as the academic – but the sporting component that is going to nurture that for him. (17)

And it was just a better choice, it was a smaller school and [Son 1] has ASD, so we chose a smaller school hoping he would cope a little better. (24)

Families with more than one child in an education sector had to choose one school to cater for more than one child, but generally privileged the special needs of one over the others.

Well we actually were choosing a school for [Son 3] ..., but they were all going to be going to the same school.... Yeah, the others would just come but [Son 3]'s the one that needs the most consideration. (19)

While zoning was a major consideration in school choice, **waiting lists and booking fees**, particularly in child care settings, made it difficult for parents to exercise much choice. Finding a place, let alone a choice of places, was often a difficult process in itself:

We'd never been posted to Brisbane before so I didn't really understand geographically where things were or how far things were and so I started closest working out...and this was October I was ringing around... "oh no, we're fully booked, you can go on the waiting list." "Oh ok, how long is the waiting list?" "Oh it's about 40 at the moment." So I rang the first four or five ... the last two were prepared to send me an application form. By the time I was ringing the last few I was starting to work out a few sort of [strategies]...and the one that she eventually got into ... I happened to drop the old "we're a defence family"... "that makes no difference, we make no preference for defence families" but she did offer to send me an application and I filled the application out, sent a deposit back and within ten days, she'd been accepted. (1)

Some families described the preferential treatment they received at ADF-supported child care centres as their habitual solution to waiting lists elsewhere: *'Because that's primarily only for defence personnel's children' (18)*. One parent had learned to work around waiting lists by making multiple bookings:

When I found out we were going to Brisbane I booked them into about three places and then I cancelled (laughs). (3)

The over-booking tactic was also reported by some for booking places in extra-curricular activities as well, to ensure that children could quickly resume their full reconstituted life in the new location. Other parents expressed exasperation with booking systems for high schools, given the unpredictability of their location: *'Where can I book? I can't book anywhere, I don't know where we'll be.'* (8). Booking fees made the multiple bookings strategy less attractive:

And you can't plan ahead...so you can't plan what schools, high schools...and also you can't just put your name down in every single private school and pay the enrolments just in case. (17)

I was in a bit of a situation because I said when we put his name down and paid our fee at the [religious high school], I did say to them 'When do we find out whether he's accepted or not because do I need to go and put my name down elsewhere?' That was a concern for me because when you're talking \$70-80 a school, that adds up after a little while and I thought 'Well I'm not going to go down and just go and put the name down everywhere'. (17)

Local knowledge also played an important role in knowing when bookings closed for the coming year:

This is absolutely so stressful ...he was supposed to put his application in to those schools five months ago... Yeah, if you don't have them in by a certain time, well they miss out for the year prior ... So I've been told I've got to put her in now ... And I'm thinking 'Well she's not in Grade six – it means she'll only go to Grade 7 next year; got plenty of time', but I don't have plenty of time and I don't know which high school to go to. (21)

Despite the work of researching markets and peer networking, some families later moved their children to another school or child care setting within the same posting. This action flowed from two sets of circumstances – being forced, or exercising further choice. Firstly, a change to better housing could force the change of school given zoning restrictions around the first school:

So she stayed at the same preschool but when I put the twins' forms in for that preschool, [daughter] blurted out "but we don't live in (suburb) anymore mummy." I could have killed her. Out comes the change of address form and I've just gone "do I have to?" and she's gone "yeah." So we lost our spots at [preschool] for the twins. And that meant we had to find another preschool and it turned out we were zoned for [School B] now. (10)

Secondly, parents reported making the decision to change schools if they 'ran into issues' and were dissatisfied with their experience at the first school:

Two thirds of the way through the school year we have another parent/teacher meeting and she tells me that [daughter] is not keeping up... and I'm wanting to know what's going on because you've told me less than three months ago that she was fine ... and now I'm asking you what's wrong because she doesn't want to come to school and now you tell me that she doesn't understand and she's not coping ... and we had quite a lot of issues and at that point I started looking for a new school. (9)

So we went for the state education because the school had only been in that location for a few years, they had brand new facilities but after being there for a year [daughter 1] got severely bullied... Yeah we went to catholic education then... They've both done four schools so far and I'm not happy that they're year 9 and 8 and they've both done four schools but if I'm not happy with the school I'm going to change them. (14)

Other reasons for changing child care placements included a place becoming available in the centre of their preferred choice, thus prompting a move from an interim placement, and finding a place closer to home so daily routes were less onerous. Given the number of institutional changes in these families' mobile histories, additional changes should be considered a very marked choice and a strong indication of these parents' willingness to 'play the market' in their child's interest. It may also speak to their high motility and their readiness to take the opportunity of moving where it offers a better solution.

To summarise this section, relocating families with school children has become onerous and complex work in the current policy context that encourages school differentiation and marketisation. Parents have learnt to distrust the simple default solution of arriving and enrolling at the local school. Though proximity is still an important consideration, these mobile families, like others, are

committed to their children's education and keen to exercise their choice to promote their children's happiness and success. They undertake careful and exhaustive research in the short time available, trawling school websites, interviewing principals, matching individual students with offerings and scrutinising documents. Some try not to 'judge a book by its cover' and all families cross-check schools' public images by working their peer network to collect anecdotal knowledge about school reputations and quality. Market practices of waiting lists and booking fees however make it difficult for mobile families to negotiate and play the market, given their inability to plan their timing or place with any certainty.

Schools should also be considered to be exposed and vulnerable in these market conditions. The informal circulation of ready-made reputations, both good and bad, will produce their own 'truth' effects in the enrolments they encourage or discourage, and schools have no opportunity to dispute such impressions. Students themselves wear the reputation of their school in the broader community. Every aspect of schools – their grounds, foyer, staff interactions, phone calls and classroom spaces - are always potentially being appraised and judged as grist for the reputational mill. In a market, no one can rest on their reputation.

The parents' narratives demonstrate a process of learning how to better negotiate their way in educational markets, and a growing market wariness:

I think now if I was to do it again I probably would have looked at more schools but I was happy with that school. But now knowing the differences you can get in schools I probably would have looked into it more. I just thought a school was a school at that stage. (15)

While the first encounter with zoning may be one of good or bad 'luck', these families will be more alert and experienced with each move, and this community move a lot. As serial movers, they will accumulate experience and strategies over time, which can make for well informed, sceptical and assertive customers. These acquired skills and dispositions become part of their motility tool kit.

Institutional discontinuities and transitions

In their interviews, the parents often described trouble and stress negotiating transitions for their children from one educational context to the next. While schooling is broadly similar across Australian states, the detailed distinctions described in Table 1, and their rolling implications across schooling years, meant that individual students were often caught in the detail of discontinuities between states and institutions. The families also described considerable effort in 'homework' to compensate for the academic and social fallout from educational transitions.

Year placement on arrival in a new state was a very common and vexed topic in parents' narratives, in particular for the early years of schooling and the transition to high school, given the variety in states' arrangements.

Yeah because [daughter] was doing the kindergarten in Darwin but then when we got down to Adelaide they didn't have it for her age so she had to stay at home again so she wasn't happy because she was used to going. (21)

He did prep 1, 2 in Victoria and then when we moved up here they jumped him straight into Year 4 ... I was against that decision and I stand with my viewpoint; it wasn't a good choice for them to make ... Age-wise that was where he was supposed to be. (2)

The cut off is 30th June –[son] is born the 5th July so he had to wait an extra year... (19)

If the child's treatments across the two systems were compatible, the continuity achieved typically made for a successful transition. Where the two systems were considered to be discontinuous, parents expressed anxiety around both the academic and social consequences for their children, and in many cases were strongly motivated to fight for what they considered their child's best interests. The 'railway gauge' discontinuities between state education systems could produce either gaps or wrinkles of repetition in children's progress from one curriculum to another. Parents were fearful and wary of both potentials, and understandably protective of their child's happiness and progress. Whether or not their fears were valid does not negate the high stakes and emotion surrounding these transitions. These families inherit and wear these institutional discontinuities as their child's private troubles.

Year placement negotiations have to be made in the midst of the critical period of relocation, when emotions and anxieties run high. Many families told stories of tense **negotiations and advocacy** over this matter:

They wanted to put him straight into grade 1 because of his age and we've gone "hang on a minute, he can't go into grade 1 because he hasn't got the fundamentals" and he could write his name and a few letters ... we demanded it. We just said "well he cannot go into Grade 1." ...the principal he was very, very good and he said "well I really think because of his age and because he was such a big boy..." well they didn't really have a choice. We said, "This is what we want and this is where we think they should be." (29)

This matter more than any other was considered worth fighting for by the parents:

Yeah, don't let the schools dictate to you. If I had to do it again, I would have insisted more than I did on him being put into Year 3. The schools will try to convince you that they're right and they know better but nobody knows your child better than you do. If you believe in something that's good for them then you need to stick to your guns and make sure that you get that. (2)

One mother described a dilemma over how far she felt she could advocate for her children without developing a damaging reputation for herself:

I was made to feel that we were being difficult. ... I was made to feel that I was being a pushy parent rather than a parent trying to do the right thing for their child. And then after all that sort of carry on we then had to front up at the start of the year with me thinking "oh god, are they going to go "here's Mrs [name]?" So that was also difficult because then you felt like you'd created a perception of who you were before you actually arrived. (1)

Occasionally, families described a more amicable, less fraught process of arriving at a school and deciding with the principal to spend some time sampling classes to work out which class suited the child best:

She said he would go straight into grade 2 and I said "ooh grade one he was going to go into" so she said "ok we'll see how he goes." (28)

Composite grades were also described as placements that assisted transitions because the child's progress could be assessed and realigned without the disruption of a class change. A softer more flexible boundary with more mutual trust and give-and-take between school and family might avoid the heightened emotion and more adversarial confrontations.

Both parents and teachers invoked **two competing rationales** for deciding where children should be relocated – firstly, placement with their age-peers for 'social' reasons, and secondly, placement according to their academic achievement or needs. Schools have a limited set of possibilities when it comes to placement – just the gross categories of year levels and class groups designed to be compatible with the local curriculum and education system. This limits their possible responses to the parents' nuanced knowledge of the individual child. Where year placement was reported as problematic, negotiations were often described as an unresolved tension between these two rationales:

When I was phoning around looking at schools before we moved and everything, they wanted to put him into Year 8 because he'd already done Year 7 and I sort of had to put my foot down and say 'No, he needs Year 7'. ... I felt that the way high school was structured, he needed to have Year 7 to get used to high school. (2)

And of course because he's been skipped a year, he's one of the youngest in his year, so he's not emotionally [ready]... (19)

Age-appropriate placements were considered problematic if, in the opinion of the parents, the child was either being 'held back' or promoted too fast. Some parents of high achieving children hoped to have their child recognised and assessed on academic performance rather than age, and were disappointed or mobilised into action when schools adhered strictly to seemingly arbitrary age guidelines for placement:

And we just said 'No, I don't think so'. We had a bit of a talk to the principal and took her school work with us. I think down in these grades it doesn't really matter so much about taking their school work but once they get sort of that Year 4 upwards, take their school work in and show the principal what sort of work they've been doing and he said 'Well I can see by the work we really should put her in Year 5'. I think my husband did write a letter and that was supposed to go to someone with the New South Wales Education Department but because the principal said 'Yeah, okay, no problems', we didn't end up using the letter. (26)

I think we're actually going to ask for him to go into Year 4. We've got his NAPLAN results – his peers will be in Year 3 but he's way off the chart in his NAPLAN - he's very smart but socially not so smart and we've tossed up but we've decided that if he is in Year 3 and getting bored, he's just going to muck up more. (33)

For serial movers, the decision made in one transition, for example, the strategy of 'holding a child back,' will impact on future transitions with cumulative and confounding effects. These parents had to consider not just the immediate placement, but its consequences for future relocations:

Some people think he's in the right year now for where he is here but then I think he might be 20 when he's in year 12. I think because we did change ... (28)

This child really had a rough trot and earlier this year we were looking down the barrel of moving again to New South Wales which means he would have then had to go "back" a year and that means that he would have been in school in total for something like 15 or 16 years when I added it up and I just thought 'Oh my gosh, no wonder's he's over it'. (34)

She's in grade ... well see that's the thing because we've moved so much it doesn't work like that because she's gone from grade 1 to grade 3 to grade – you know, it's just we've gone from Tassie to Queensland to Victoria, back to Queensland again so the years are just completely stuffed up. (32)

There is another worrying layer to year placements in institutional transitions and that is the sense that the children themselves make of their placement, and what they think it says about them and their identity as a learner:

she saw a child from grade 1 ... her friend from her grade one class in (previous town) get put into grade three and she got put into grade 2. She didn't understand that ... she knew she could spell better than her, she knew she could do all these things better than her but because of age got put ahead of her. you've got to try and explain why they're going down a grade instead of going up a grade. I've seen so many kids get so frustrated with that and not understand it at all. (12)

I'm hoping at the end of this year I'm going to be a bit more forceful than now and say she needs to be in a 2/3 so she can do some of the 3 stuff. Because at the beginning of the year it was a bit of an issue because she would dumb herself down and pretend she couldn't do things. (11)

I think it was hard for them to go back into the same year... It sounds like the same to them but I said 'It's not the same. The difference is that the education in New South Wales is different to what it is in Queensland' ... So for them it was hard – I think it was more of a self-esteem issue I said 'You're not repeating, you just have to go into the same year because that's how it works in New South Wales'. (23)

Such renegotiation of learners' identities could also involve the messages that teachers gave students as well:

My eldest came into Grade Three and [the work in] Grade Three here he had done in Grade One in Melbourne. So he was not happy. I had him coming home in tears nearly every day saying that he hated it and didn't understand why he had to keep doing it all when he'd already done it all and then getting told by the teacher that he was just a disobedient child and things like that ... I think I got to my worst when his teacher in grade 3 actually told me that she thought that he was stupid. ... so I brought all of his work in that he had done at the previous school in Melbourne and that's when I had the meeting with the principal and showed her everything that he had done and he was like the top of his class all through school. ... That was the year that nearly broke me here. (30)

This account of a disruptive and damaging transition also serves to highlight the readiness of the parent to rise to the occasion on behalf of the child's interests.

One family described how their habitual approach was to defuse or dismiss year placement issues as merely labels for their children's sake. This strategy served as an investment in the family's motility and positive attitude to moving:

Yeah, so it's always been the same level of education so it just was called differently and that's how I tried to explain it to my kids. They know now... and I always try to make it fun, it was an adventure; it was exciting so it was never anything scary. (32)

This section has highlighted the anxiety and parent strategies around year placements and the tension between the social and academic rationales informing placements. The school offers broad institutional categories into which the child must fit, while the parents typically seek a more individualised case-by-case consideration, and are willing to fight for it if need be. The next section describes the challenge in making the transition to new curricula and associated pedagogies, for both parent and child.

Curricular and pedagogical discontinuities

Different states operate different curricula and promote particular pedagogical approaches. These state orthodoxies, while considered right and natural in their own settings, can contrast strongly with each other. Even schools within the same state can differ in their curricular offerings, for example, which second language programs are offered at particular schools:

Yeah, that was the sticking point there was [son] wanting to continue Indonesian and [School A] was the only school that offered it so we had to get something in this area. (2)

The early years in particular display marked differences around the introduction of formal instruction, handwriting style and curricular selection. Families expressed a preference for the familiar modes whose premises they understood:

Even though they're starting to get into line with the grades, the way they teach is still so different. When we were in Victoria and [Son 2] was in his early years there – he did Year 1, 2 and 3 there – the way they teach them to read... I grew up in the New South Wales school system and so did [husband] and I had [Son 1] go through primary school in the Queensland system so I was familiar with both of those and the way they taught them to read in Victoria just boggled the mind; I didn't understand it at all. (2)

Many parents were wary of Queensland's innovative 'play-based' preparatory program in particular, because of its marked difference to more conventional programs elsewhere. Some parents did not understand or value its educational design and were concerned at the lack of continuity it would produce on transfer back to other states:

Prep in Queensland was more like day care; ... the only thing they did sitting down writing was writing their name of a morning. There was no actual formal instruction of anything so of course ... his five year old sister who started transition this year could write and speak better than he could at the beginning of the year because he was basically a year behind – he'd had a year of nothing. So at the

beginning of the year, he was actually having to go and see the special needs teacher to try and catch him up on a year's worth of work. (19)

[I felt] Gutted, absolutely gutted ... because in Brisbane all she learnt in prep was how to stick glitter on a piece of paper and make toilet bloody roll binoculars which is crap! She gets up to grade one [in another state], she's expected to be able to read and write. So my other daughter's walked in straight from daycare and she's being taught how to read and write and do all that sort of good stuff...so for the first two months I was massively stressed because my daughter didn't know how to read because she never got taught how to read. ...it's only through the work put in by us and her teachers after school that she's really good at it now. So for the first 2/3 months when we got here I was really stressed having to get tutors and that sort of thing. (15)

Both of these parents quoted above could draw a parallel with another child of theirs whose move from pre-school to Year One was continuous within the same state system and unproblematic. Whether the effect they describe is particular to the child, or due to the interstate transition, their accounts tell of considerable stress that the family had to absorb and address in the transition. Another parent described an initial discomfort with the play-based Queensland curriculum, but later coming to appreciate its design:

I don't mean to say that he was smarter than anybody who was already in the prep class but it was just because he was used to that regimented way and I would have liked to have some continuity for him. ... after his first day at this school he said "mum, it feels like we've gone back to [pre-school], I'm not a baby anymore." And I went to the teacher and she basically told to just give him some time ... and then I came to realise that it's not like what it was back in Puckapunyal. They were learning the same stuff as he was back then but just in a different way and I had to wrap my head around it. (3)

Other families described the effect of curricular discontinuities as gaps in presumed knowledge, or 'little things' like the terms used in classroom explanations.

One other problem that we do actually find going interstate is the terminology for the kids that they struggle with. The simple things...even school terminology for words like adding or multiplying they use different words and the kids get so confused and they...like [daughter] was getting upset because she didn't understand it and we explained in the way they'd learned it in the past and they go "oh!" Just little things like that. (4)

She repeated Year 2 because she was so confused with the change in terminology from Victoria to New South Wales – that's what we worked out was the issue in the end. She didn't understand what they were asking her to do. ... she didn't understand what the teacher was saying so rather than ask, she just pretended to be working very studiously and not get anything done. It was very sad. (9)

Such 'little things' become big things when parents watch their child wear the effects of institutional discontinuities. Handwriting was another typical sore point for parents of children in the early years:

Also the hand writing is a big issue because the three different states are completely different and at each different school they try and teach them that state's way of the handwriting.... They do work on it and I've found probably this year I've said "don't try and change it because we're not going to be here for that time, focus more on other things." (4)

Now it's a fairly big thing when you're so concerned about making the letters the right way that you're not really learning how to spell the words; you're just making the letters the right way. (9)

The DCO offers families financial support to pay for tutors to assist children make their educational transitions where indicated. Families often reported a learning curve, coming to better understand and use such entitlements more over successive moves:

That school was very good in some ways because they were very knowledgeable about the advantages that come with being in the army and knew that if you moved you were entitled to get a tutor for a certain amount of time and the army would pay for it and that sort of thing. So when we moved, the principal called me up and said 'Look, Joel would really benefit from having some extra tutoring for his reading...' (2)

I think the defence have got this really good thing that they will give private tuition to children when they first come it and their first 18 months. ... The DSTA who was there at the time, she told me about it. (5)

This knowledge contributes to their motility tool kit – knowing that they have that safety net if necessary for their child's academic transition. The next section describes how parents in these mobile families, in addition to such tutoring, undertook extra 'homework', being the work of ameliorating curricular and pedagogical discontinuities and smoothing their child's transition into and out of different schooling systems.

Homework for academic and social support

All the parents interviewed were highly invested in their children's education, and keen that their child's education would not suffer unnecessarily from the family's mobility. Their concerns in this regard mirrored the dual rationales for year placement – they carefully monitored both academic progress and social integration, and considered both necessary for a successful transition. This often informed a conscious and sustained effort to support each child's transition, a form of 'homework' conducted within the family unit. Such efforts had become a well-established routine around each relocation for some:

Every time we move, even though they say 'Oh you're a defence family, we'll make allowances for the handwriting' – they don't. The kids come home 'Oh, no, I've got to do my k's this way now mum' and it's like 'Yes, darling, that's fine. Have you got the little letter board' because they send you home a little letter board when you start with all the letters mapped out on it – we stick that down on a piece of paper and every time we do our homework in the beginning we bring it out so they know which way the letters have got to be made for this state. (9)

One family expressed the opinion that it was their work, as much as the schools, to address the education needs arising from their mobility:

As a parent I think it's important that we take responsibility for things that the kids might miss out on when we're moving and actually not expect the new school to pick up on everything. It's a teamwork thing. We have to be responsible for at least identifying and maybe coming up with management plans with the school. In our case we've just decided that it's easier to come up with our own management plans and not involve the school. (33)

In contrast, another family described dissatisfaction with the school's efforts and standards, and their own strategy of supplementing their children's education, in particular, to maintain the standards they anticipated in the next state:

We're basically just tolerating it and I do a lot of work with them at home. I buy them books to keep them up to Victorian standard and they also work on the computer programs so that way they work through at their own pace, that's all I care about ... basically if I could afford to put them in tutoring I'd put them in tutoring, just to keep them up to a level that I feel they need to be because as I said if [daughter 1] goes back to Victoria, I'm not quite sure what grade they'll put her in and if she needs to be at a higher level...which I've heard from the principal of [school] that ...he has to do a lot of supplementary work to get them back up to standard where I know she should be for Victoria so I'm trying to keep her there because I'm not going to let her fall behind. (12)

Parents also monitored and supported their child's social transition, often reporting how they acutely shared their children's social distress on moving:

I've never had to do it so I do actually feel sorry for the kids. Like when we left Singleton, my daughter was just distraught because she had to leave all her friends and she still talks about them all. (11)

It was very hard for her on a number of levels because she left a number of friends in Melbourne and she found that hard and I fully understood that. (8)

So when it changed over to [second school], [husband] and I were real frantic the first day at school and when he went and picked them up they were so happy; they had ten friends, it was the best day. I could have cried I was so excited because it was such a great day for them and it was the first school they'd been happy. (21)

Many expressed the opinion that this aspect of moving was getting harder, not easier with each move, as children got older, and less motile:

... they took a lot longer to transition to this school because they made good friends at the other school and it took them longer to settle in. They're settled in now but you could see how it's going to get harder as the years go on to extricate them. (27)

Some families reported undertaking explicit strategies to address social issues:

just really talking to the children and making them aware of what's going on – and you're going to go to a new school and help them make friends because I think friends are the most important thing, you know, with the education isn't it? (5)

We put on what I call our 'making friends faces' and mummy goes out and is embarrassingly shameful and says 'hello' to absolutely everybody and we all make friends ... We go so far as to after the first few weeks of school when he still had no friends that, even though it's against school rules, he would take toys to share, to play and make friends with because he was just having so much trouble. He had them in his bag for quite a while – plastic things we got from McDonalds you know, just some sort of monster thing that all boys love and yeah, that seemed to work quite well. He now has accumulated this nice little group of friends. (9)

Another family described working on their own child's resilience, confidence and strategies:

I've tried to teach all of my kids that, when they say they're not going to have any friends, that they have to have the confidence in themselves that they're worthy: worthy to be a friend and willing to try their best. I don't care whether they get zero out of ten or ten out of ten – life's not a competition.... But they're all beautiful and they're funny and they're worthy of being a friend and having a friend but also I teach my kids to look for the lonely kids and go and search them out even if they're lonely [themselves]. Then everything else just falls into place. (20)

Many parents subscribed to the opinion that if the child was happy and comfortable socially, then the academic side of things would look after itself, thus the first immediate task was to address how the child is coping socially:

We said 'Look take the first term, settle in, get to know everybody and don't worry about the academic side of it'. (6)

For some parents, the desire to promote positive friendships for their child informed strategies around timing their moves, or investing in local child care prior to the start of school:

Because we were there for 6 months of that year and then 6 months into the next year, I thought he was going to have children go to school with him from there, just to have some sort of friendship base and that worked out really well. (7)

For some families, promoting social networks for both children and spouse was a reason behind school choice:

When I found out my husband was going to be in Afghanistan I thought I'll have better support if the kids have more friends. Because [school] is much closer and if you drive ten minute to [catholic school] not as many kids from [suburb] go there so I won't have that moral support. (14)

There's a private school but it runs from transition to year 12. So if I put her in there in year 7 she has year 7 to 12 whereas if I put her in a primary school she has one year to make friends and then I move her again to go to high school. (16)

We eliminated one of the choices because initially we were told that we would be up here for quite some time and one of the schools only goes to the end of Year 9 which means that he would then have to move again, to another school ... and I thought 'I'm not going through that process again', so I eliminated that school straight away purely because I didn't want to move him again. There was nothing wrong with the schooling at all; it was just the move situation... Going through that 'Oh here we go again, another set of enrolments, another set of uniforms, another set of everything'. It was like 'No, thank you'. (17)

Other families keenly sought a place in the same school on return to a location, given the presence of old friends:

All his friends that he had when he was in kindergarten, they all remembered him.... We made sure we were [back in the same location], we sweated over it didn't we?... yeah we had to make sure ... at the time we got the right defence house to get him in. (29)

One family could see a valuable lesson from the constant rebuilding of social networks, both produced by, and in turn enabling, family mobility, that is their mobility enhancing their motility:

I think it makes the children resilient. Because they're pretty shy kids they'll get used to making friends in different areas and growing up near the RAF base myself I had friends coming and going...it's good to toughen them up a bit I think (laughs) ... yeah they've had friends come and go. So if we weren't going they would be. (28)

The DCO fund the employment of Defence School Transition Aides (**DSTAs**) in schools with a critical mass of ADF families in their community, for example, near large bases or defence housing areas. Their role is to proactively assist the successful transition of children from ADF families on relocation to a new school, in terms of their social integration:

She would take all of the defence children for a session every week. They would come in and they would do art or they would do something or they would have a discussion about 'Where's dad? What's he doing?' or 'Where's mum? Where are they? What are they doing? Are they overseas and how are you coping with that? What's mummy up to?' and they'd get together... 'Is mummy okay?' and that sort of stuff because obviously mummy's the only one home; if mummy's not doing okay then the kids aren't doing okay. (9)

They also reach out and liaise with parents, in particular spouses while ADF members are deployed. DSTAs are well informed of troop movements and the impacts on families, and are often female ADF partners themselves with intimate knowledge of the mobile lifestyle's demands. Their presence in a school served to distinguish the school as one experienced in the needs of mobile ADF families, and was highly valued by parents:

All of them have been on the ball with what deployments are happening ... when they know a deployment is happening or when there's big bush exercises on or whatever, to say 'We're running something in the library or in a particular classroom so we can do things to post off to your parents'. (18)

I think that the DSTA position is fabulous. It's lovely that the kids can have someone to go to, someone who understands them if they've got an issue...I mean the teachers do it of course but at least someone that can give them advice and strategies to help them with mum or dad being away and I think that works really, really well. (29)

Oh love them. I think they are beautiful. (30)

With serial moves, these families come to fully appreciate the difference this role can make in their transitions. On the flipside, they can therefore be critical of people in that job who don't fulfil the role as they have experienced it elsewhere. The presence of a DSTA in the school was considered by some to be crucial in their choice of school:

And the other thing I always look for – when you get your welcome pack from DCO, it has a list of the schools in the back and it says which ones have the defence school transition aide ... Well that means for a start there has to be a certain percentage of defence children at that school for them to qualify to have one so you know that there's going to be other defence families there, but the defence school transition aides, they're the ones that if he's deployed, there are activities and stuff they do with the kids and you just know that there's somebody there that's going to make sure the children end up in the right place or if they're lost, someone... it's just somebody out there specifically looking after them... That's the first thing I always look at is whether it's got a DSTA or not. (19)

The DSTA role has developed over time in response to ADF career mobility, sponsored by an organisation sufficiently large, spatially concentrated and resourced to make it happen. They are a unique para-professional resource which can service the family according to complex and changing circumstances, not just see the child as an individualised learner. This model begs the question of who performs the same functions of careful induction, monitoring, troubleshooting, counselling, and social lubricant for mobile families who don't fall under such external institutional sponsorship, or in settings without the critical mass that warrants such specialist roles.

To summarise this section, these families can cross organisational boundaries between nations, states, sectors, systems, schools or combinations thereof with each move. Each administrative level imposes its own requirements and institutional templates into which the mobile child's educational progress must be translated and realigned. Institutions are structured to deal with generalised populations such as years and class groups, while families represent and champion individual students. Like different ends of a telescope, staff in institutions have expertise in the big picture of general and typical progress of cohorts through their local system over time, while the parents have expertise in the detailed particularities of their child, and his/her individual history over successive relocations. The generalised professional experience and confidence of teachers and principals accrued from watching multiple children pass through their school is not available to parents for whom each child is an unrepeatable high stakes experiment. 'Small stuff' like handwriting styles and local terminology becomes 'big stuff' from a parents' perspective as they watch its effects on their child's happiness, learning and self-concept. They are understandably vigilant and protective of their child's interests, and learn to become more assertive in their negotiations about year placements in particular with each move. The school and parents both lack the knowledge that the other brings to the table but when these two sides of the equation first meet, it will be within the emotionally charged period of urgent relocation, and much rides on the outcome and nature of these early discussions.

Competing priorities around academic progress and social integration can make decisions complex and conflicted. These families can be suspicious of more innovative curricula and pedagogy, such as the Queensland preparatory play-based program, not necessarily on its own terms, but more for what it might mean for their child's eventual transition into other state systems. These families have to consider the next projected move, not just the current one. Families described forms of extra 'homework' they undertake to facilitate transitions, both academic and social. They work on strategies at the level of the family or the child, but did not report any strategies for changing school or institutional templates, beyond expressing the wish for a national curriculum:

If I had fairy wishes or had a magic wand ... the government somewhere along the line should start waking up to it and say 'Hold on, I'm the Commonwealth government, you will have one standard for English, one standard for maths, one standard for science, ... (21)

The transient family is not well positioned to mobilise as an activist lobby group that can change local institutional practices, thus their interests will depend on organisational representatives such as DSTAs and DCOs to promote their generic interests at an institutional level.

Seeking and manufacturing continuity

The parents as a group aim to achieve as much continuity in their child's education as they can, despite the institutional discontinuities they encounter. Families report a variety of strategies they hoped would manufacture some sense of continuity to connect their pasts, presents and futures. Achieving continuity was not just a concern in education, but also health care and other social services.

The importance of continuity grew as the child approached high school, and families sought stability in the final years of schooling in particular. In some ways, this emerging priority comes from the experience of cumulative discontinuities in the earlier years and their effects. Parents' concern around the final years is formally recognised by the ADF in terms of sympathetic consideration when children reach this stage. Whether such consideration can be stretched across the staggered and overlapping needs of multiple children is less certain. Otherwise, parent strategies included using the mechanism and opportunity of school choice to maximise continuity in a number of ways, and then more extreme solutions that manipulated ADF careers and family arrangements to achieve educational continuity.

Working within possible school choices, the choice to stay within the Catholic system, regardless of different state curriculum, gave some families a sense of continuity:

Because he went to Catholic School in Queensland – it's not the religion that I choose that, it's more I know it's a set curriculum and just a bit more stability ... There might just be a bit more continuity with his schooling. (6)

A friend of mine works in a Catholic school – she said that they run very similar curriculums across the board... whatever State, they're pretty much similar, so we sort of looked at that option... (18)

One family chose a school on the basis of the higher year placement offered, which they perceived to be more consistent and continuous with the pedagogical approach the child had experienced previously:

I was hoping he would get into year one and the main reason we chose [school] was because they try for that and I don't mean to say that he was smarter than anybody who was already in the prep class but it was just because he was used to that regimented way and I would have liked to have some continuity for him. (3)

Another family described their resolve to keep the children well informed and maintain family routines to achieve what consistency they could across moves:

I think one of the most important things in an army career, whether be at home or with their education with kids is keeping a routine and making sure that they know what's happening because it's very easy for them to feel like they're losing control. They have no choice... You know they had no say in whether we go to Victoria or we go to Western Australia or wherever we go. It's just like 'Okay kids we're going' and they don't feel like they have any control in the situation so you need to make them feel like they have something that's consistent. (2)

Some families of secondary school children described the search for a high school offering the same second language to allow the child's language study to continue uninterrupted.

There was a different more haphazard but welcome sense of continuity achieved when families found they were posted back to a place they have already been in, and could slot back easily into past networks:

I think we found it easy coming back to Townsville for the third time – we've got a lot of friends here; a lot of friends that aren't defence as well and we know where we want to be, we know what school the girls are going to be at. ... we knew where we were going for soccer and swimming was the only thing that we really had to look at. (26)

When educational continuity became the family priority, families started to search for solutions and strategies beyond the local educational market. Some families asked for postings within the same state to avoid a change in curriculum. This partial solution was particularly sought by parents of a child with special needs:

I said to [husband] 'If it's at all possible, I want to stay in Queensland; if not Brisbane, at least Queensland because then he's in the same school system' and he went to them with that and they've agreed to keep us in Queensland.... It's a win for us because it keeps us in Queensland; it keeps him in the same schooling system; he's not chopping and changing again. (2)

I said to [husband] I'm not taking them out of the Queensland education system and once again we'll prove our case because [son 1] doesn't cope... So [husband] said to [unit that organises postings] that we can't take the kids out of the Queensland education system due to my child having Aspergers syndrome and he said "what's that" and [husband] said "here you can look it up" and it's just too hard and if we can keep that little bit the same it's a lot easier. (24)

Others requested a second posting in the same location.

My husband's actually asked... when he had his interview he said 'I'd like to stay in Darwin' (39:42) ... there are different posts he has to fulfil to get his career profile ... so he's actually got another two years here so it means [son] will finish his primary school here. ... I think we've taken the decision of continuity for the children's education is such a vital thing. (5)

For some families such a request entailed a difficult decision to delay promotional opportunities, and the material consequences of that decision:

Still sergeant at the time... I'm there for a year and then I do all my promotion courses and then get offered a posting and it was all over the place. Like Australia wide; it had Tasmania, Western Australia... these were the options they gave me and I just went over and over it and in the end I said no because they wouldn't accept...[wife] was at the time doing her study to become a teacher's aide ... and we just said no. So I put my foot down I just said "look, I'm not going to take the promotion..." and the kids had just got settled. Like we'd just come back and they had just set up their network of friends and school was lovely and everyone was happy, everyone was settled and it was a happy home. (29)

The idea of home schooling had also been contemplated by some as a possible way to maintain continuity, if school transitions became more problematic. Given the nature of this study's sampling through schools, no parent interviewed had ultimately taken this decision, but a number raised it as

a possibility and fallback position if they couldn't make the current placement work for their particular child:

I was so frustrated with the way the school dealt with the bullying that I even was prepared for home schooling. Because you also don't have the issues of when you're moving state having to change schooling systems.... I knew there was a family in Canberra who home schooled and they were defence and they just sort of said it made it easier when you moved state to state... I think it will always be at the back of my mind that if I'm not happy then I will home school them. I mean ideally I would like that child four goes to school and I will go back to work but if it doesn't work out I will home school them. (14)

Boarding school in the past has been an institutional solution to achieve continuity in education for mobile families, but was rarely considered as a strategy in this sample of ADF families, except for families that had transferred from the British army, where boarding school is still a popular strategy and well supported:

This is something that in the UK they deal with a lot better ... they use boarding schools because they know that we move around so much, they allow for stability of education by putting them into boarding schools. It's not ideal because then you don't have the family unit you would like – going to a local school but in terms of stability of education really then it's subsidised by the services so a good package to have. Over here they don't that and boarding schools aren't the norm anyway and there's not a lot of them.... People are horrified that we sent [daughter] to boarding school – they actually gasp, they go 'What?' (13)

One family considered boarding school as a last resort solution if they were to be posted overseas, 'to do the Australian component of education' (17). One blended family had arranged an informal boarding arrangement, the child living with her father and grandparent elsewhere to continue her high schooling without disruption. While the cost in the Australian context was considered prohibitive, families where one of the parents themselves had experienced boarding school seemed more open to the idea:

It is definitely not out of the question but I'd do my homework though. I'd have to really look closely. (17)

Another institutional solution supported by the ADF in order to achieve educational continuity is to post the ADF member separately from the family, '**Married with dependents separated,**' thus achieving institutional continuities (ADF career and education) at the cost of the family unit's contiguity. High schooling loomed as a crucial phase in which families would consider the extreme solution of an unaccompanied posting to maintain both ADF career and educational continuity.

I've told my husband as soon as [son 1] hits high school I will not be moving, he can go wherever he needs to go but I will be staying wherever he is going to high school ... high school's the big one for us, to get the basis of a good education you need to be in a place for a certain amount of time. (3)

I would like them not to move schools in high school ... because even though hubby has a career in defence, we've come to the conclusion that for that period of time that I and the kids will remain in a locality... I think that [decision] is far easier than moving all the time... (33)

This was not considered a popular decision, rather a necessary one if it came to that:

I don't think we would consider that as a family unless we were forced to... We'd probably consider that if it came to the case of the kids being in the last years of their secondary school and for whatever reason I was being forced to move then potentially we'd consider that I suppose for the good of the kids but you know... but I still would have to be convinced that it's good for the kids' being part of a family and I sort of sometimes think that family always outweighs school. (1)

ADF families frequently accommodate the absence of the ADF member on training exercises or deployment. These protracted absences were invoked in some cases as evidence that the separate posting could work:

P: We're really not keen to move anywhere, especially at the end of primary school going into high school, that's really important for the children. And I can cope without him here. There's a fellow at hubby's workplace that's doing the same thing, he's sees how hard it is on him but I think it's easier than being overseas [on deployment]because of school. (28)

In other cases, such absences were grounds for not considering the separated posting:

I believe that there are benefits to keeping them in a consistent schooling but I don't believe that that outweighs the benefits of them having their familyThey're without their father enough with the demands of his job and I feel that it would have to be a last resort situation for me to take their father away from them full time. (2)

The most extreme solution to achieving educational continuity was to abandon the ADF career. Some families described themselves as very close to that tipping point:

We're near it now... It could be that we've got the house. It's also because I think [daughter]'s struggling and I'm becoming more aware that she's had no continuity. She's in Year 5 and she's had five different schools in five different states.... For him, more so lately, he keeps saying that he could get out... There was this big 20 year thing – he's stayed 20 years so he's entitled to his pension so at some point the issues are going to become too large and he probably will just get out. (9)

We desperately want to stay here... Even if it means him discharging, we'll stay here... it's just too hard for them ... by the time it's time to go again, ... [son] will be in high school which is going to be a challenge for him at the best of time... yeah, the balance is going to tip against the career and the career will give before... But hopefully they'll let us stay won't they? (19)

To summarise this section, while these mobile families can't assume stability, they do hope to achieve or manufacture continuity, and this is an important explicit consideration when choosing schools, and market sectors. As the effects of their mobility on their children's education accumulate over time, priorities often shift so that achieving continuity if not stability for their children's education comes to outweigh the demands of the ADF career as a family priority. Boarding school is not entertained as a solution by most Australian families. While some find an amicable solution in repeat postings in a location or state, with or without impact on career progression, other families will contemplate separated postings or leaving the defence career if it comes to that. The cost-benefit assessments in these decisions are difficult, the more so because of the uncertainties about what options might emerge, thus families can agonize over their responses to possible eventualities.

'it's really tricky trying to work out if for [daughter's] sake we stay here for her to do high school ... it's really tricky. We just haven't come to that decision.' (4)

Children's high schooling emerges as a common point at which the families' motility suddenly evaporates. Despite the skills, routines, strategies and knowledge they have accrued over past moves, the stakes are considered to be too high around high schooling. Families themselves are perhaps less able to do the 'homework' of assisting in academic transition as they have for the primary school child. Social integration is considered more fraught for the older child, and there is less capacity within the family themselves to compensate and resource the transition from their motility tool kit.

Cultivating motility

While the analysis thus far has made evident family stresses associated with the mobility in an ADF career, these families do repeatedly move and successfully so, achieving and maintaining a 'normal' family life in extraordinary circumstances. The ADF career offers many benefits, notably secure employment with good prospects, and strong family support mechanisms. The job and the uniform are well respected. Many relish the lifestyle, in particular the opportunity to travel:

Well you get to go everywhere don't you? ... Well, here's my thing. The house that we're living in now, in civilian life there is no way we would be able to afford to be living in a house like this in this area. The subsidised grant and the housing and everything – it's brilliant; absolutely brilliant. And you know every fortnight that he's going to get paid. At the moment the way things are going all over the place... If he wasn't in the services I wouldn't have been able to go back to uni because I would have had to go back to work. It's only that he's in the service that we can afford for me not to work. (19)

You get to see Australia, you get to meet heaps of lovely people and that was one of our goals, to look around Australia, to get out...we lived in a small mining town with a population of 1000 people so it was our dream to get out and have a good look around. Like moving is fun but... (24)

Thus the intense work involved in transitions between institutions need not displace their general enjoyment and appreciation of the travel and the life experiences they would not otherwise have had, and the two aspects should not be confused or conflated. The work of transitions displays both the extent and limits of coping mechanisms in each family's motility tool box; their relish of the travel speaks to their readiness to contemplate mobility as a family project, despite the work in transitions. In the narratives above, the motile disposition has been shown to wax and wane over the family lifecycle. This section focuses on how these families reported cultivating their capacity to move, and the resources, strategies, habits and mindsets that made routine moving more thinkable and doable. One family's strategies will not necessarily suit another family but they share a common purpose in maintaining a viable reconciliation between family and career in mobile circumstances.

A few of the parents had themselves been raised in mobile ADF families, and lifestyle motility had been normalised and naturalised over time. These women were confident about raising their own children that way:

I think having the background of daddy goes away, daddy comes home has helped with this situation here. Like helped me with the kids when daddy goes away and daddy comes home....see my mum was a navy wife and her mum was an air force wife and her mum was a defence wife so it's in our blood to do this. (10)

ADF families lived with the prospect of a move in the near future, and some as a result reported being judicious when it came to investing effort and energy in their current but temporary location. They had good reasons for not growing roots in a location, if it meant ripping them up later:

So by that stage I thought there was no point (finding a child care place) because there's no point in even looking for work because we're moving again. (1)

But it's also hard...[daughter 1] has just come home, she wants to join the scouts here and I'm kind of thinking do I really want her to join if we're here for one year or two, like do I really want her to get involved in that and then pull her out of that and start again in... (4)

Short-term transience is a mindset which maintains a state of readiness and normalises both uncertainty and anticipation of the next move:

[school] we were looking at and I thought because it's near the RAAF base there would be a high turnover of defence children so therefore they would be used to the defence - not that that's a big issue with me, I'll be honest, but I thought they would understand that if I suddenly rang and said 'No, we're not coming' - that type of thing - they would understand where I'm coming from. (17)

Parents described how they prepare and coach their children for these circumstances:

I wanted him to go there [school on base] for the teachers as well as being surrounded by the army children so he has a concept of we're not staying there forever and with my boys I tell them what's going to happen: "we're not going to be here forever, we're going to move, you're only going to be here a short time." Just get them used to the idea that it's not going to be constant. (3)

I tried to encourage both my children to get involved in things that will get them to meet other people; only because I think it's important because we will be moving quite regularly or there is a chance that we could move so they should find it a little bit easier I guess to introduce themselves to other kids. (18)

Over time, some children reportedly became practiced at relocation and developed skills, resilience and habits for being the 'new kid':

And he's always been able to find his own little clique of people to be with. (2)

I think the fact that this was the first time that they'd started school at the start of the year so when they've started in the middle of the year it was like "oh you're the new kid" and felt a little bit self conscious, still sort of blended in well but because it was the start of the year there were other new kids there as well. (7)

One mother regretfully described how transience had come to be seen as a solution to local issues by her children:

I had both of my girls come home and say "When's daddy posting? I don't want to be there" and after 12 months and having them settled, I thought, "Well they should be okay," but then for them to come

home and say that, it's like "okay, they're looking for a posting now because they don't like the school." And they think that's the only way out of it. (12)

This state of readiness and anticipation is also a state of uncertainty – not knowing when or where the next shift will be. These families get used to this, and describe optimistic and pragmatic mindsets:

Basically you need to make the most, you have to make the most of every opportunity you can get, with every posting you just have to make ... you can't plan it ... (4)

The whole thing is not knowing, constantly and trying to make best of it with what you've got. (12)

We knew it was coming, we just didn't know where we were going so I prepared the boys and they helped pack up their clothes and things like that and I said we were either going to Brisbane or Darwin, that's all we knew. So I researched all the stuff in Darwin, all the stuff in Brisbane because I didn't know where we were going but I knew it was going to be one of those two.... So I went ahead and said I'm either going to go to one of these two places so I need to know about them. So I'm on the internet, talking to the DCO here, talking to the DCO in Darwin. And I mean we had a week where we finally knew we were going to Brisbane (3)

One family reported living in a locality for ten years, but that seeming stability only unfolded as a sequence of short six to twelve month extensions on the original posting, thus their capacity to plan into the future was always curtailed by the constant possibility of a move:

I guess I could have pushed that [children's educational aspirations] along if I'd felt the need to – but given that we often didn't know what was coming up next it sometimes just seemed almost fruitless to be pushing, pushing and 'we'll do this here' and then you know good and well that your next experience might be ... It's very tough and it does affect the children as well because they will make enquiries – 'Are we going to...?' or 'Can we, may we, will we?' 'Well we will need to see if we are still living here then'. It's a bit of a hard thing. (34)

Uncertainty meant families had to consider all possibilities and maintain their options in educational markets whatever scenario unfolds:

because we didn't know if we were going to be posted we had her registered at the local school in the event that we weren't posted, because I've had it before where they say "yeah you're posted, definitely, pack your bags" and it didn't come through ... we weren't posted. ... We had to prepare in case we weren't posted. (8)

Market practices such as booking fees could make this cover-all-bases strategy unsustainable:

And you can't plan ahead...so you can't plan what schools, high schools...and also you can't just put your name down in every single private school and pay the enrolments just in case. (16)

Given uncertainty, some families' response was to ensure they had accumulated the financial resources that allowed them the widest choice of opportunities, come what may:

Yeah, we're always planning to never close off one of those options so if we found that was the only preferable option for us then ... what we're aiming for is that we won't be prevented from making that decision by financial issues (1)

Such a financial strategy for motility wasn't available to all families, or in all locations (private schooling in Sydney and Melbourne was generally considered very expensive). The rank and therefore income of the ADF member made a difference in families' capacity to contemplate private schooling as an option, as did whether or not the spouse was working, and the number of children. Many families could consider Christian and Catholic schools as affordable private schooling options wherever they were to be posted and some were prepared to 'make those sacrifices' (14) if circumstances warranted it. This attitude did not necessarily rely on the family themselves being religious. Again, this is a proactive flexible mindset that makes moving more thinkable and doable.

Perhaps the most significant accommodation many of these families made to enable and promote their mobility was to compromise on the spouse's career path and hence income potential:

I actually finished that when [child] was born and haven't worked since and at this stage have no plans of returning because I see other families and that where the spouse is working full time and the struggle that they're trying to cope and deal with it. (4)

I am at university at the moment, starting – fingers crossed – behavioural science degree next semester but I've gone back into education after taking time out to bring up my family; it was a conscious decision that that's what we would do because of my husband's job. Somebody needed to have the stability. (13)

The spouse's work was often described as the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle to be put in place, and depended on suitable arrangements being in place for all other members of the family:

I guess for me...and you know always in the back of my mind...not that that's been a huge issue for me since the kids because my career has really taken a back step in that I've chosen to be at home with the kids and stuff like that, but always in the back of my mind is "What opportunities are going to come for me?" and "Are they going to fit in with what's happening with everybody else?" (1)

No, couldn't find child care at all. I got offered the most amazing job in the world – awesome wage, great house; couldn't find child care – had to turn the job down. (20)

The frequent absence of the ADF member also discouraged the spouse to return to work full time:

My idea is with a husband in the forces I cannot see how working full time would work. I'm not prepared to have people looking after my children before and after school, that's just not my philosophy. I would like to work school hours and I would like to work probably for myself. (9)

Further education by distance or online mode had allowed some women to pursue a career path despite their moves. Otherwise, many women successfully found part-time, family-compatible work on arrival in new locations, which suggests that they were underemployed to some degree. It was notable how many of the women interviewed had found part-time work as teacher aides or volunteered in their children's schools.

This section has illustrated how these mobile families cultivate mindsets, habits and lifestyles that accommodate the constant possibility of relocation and its uncertainties. The next section considers the experiences and phases that, on the other hand, challenge and undo such motile dispositions and skills. Maintaining motility is thus shown to be ongoing work as circumstances change and priorities are renegotiated within these families.

Eroding motility

Despite strategies and flexible or pragmatic mindsets, events and circumstances could render moving increasingly difficult over time. The discussion above about institutional transitions demonstrated how the social integration of the older child reportedly became more vexed, and was considered a necessary condition for their academic success. Families with a child approaching, or in, high school typically expressed reluctance to move, to avoid disrupting their child's social networks at this stage, because of the possible effect on the child's academic progress. Other reasons for families not moving emerged as stories about particular members of the family suffering unduly in some way:

Like he's very social but it's harder for him to make friends and keep those connections. But high school's the big one for us, to get the basis of a good education you need to be in a place for a certain amount of time. Like we're here for three years and I'm hoping to get the next three years here as well so then we can have ... he can have a standard block of education at this one school and then he get the basis of reading, writing and maths sorted and then in high school stay put and then develop those but I mean I can't have it all my own way. (3)

One unhappy member of the family could tip the balance between priorities. The child with special needs was often reported as a reason for minimising or slowing the rate of mobility:

It's completely changed everything. Now I've got this kid who... there are reasons why he does what he does and we now have to live around him sort of thing. I mean I don't – how do you explain it? We've had to change what we do because of him, because of the way he deals with stuff and that's really hard to do ... (32)

The wife's job prospects, educational project or combination of such factors could impinge as well, and tip the balance:

P1: Well normally I would have been posted at the end of this year – I've actually asked to stay for another year. That [son's reading problem] was one of the factors that went in. P2: Because of that too I can earn more money while I'm up here. P1: And I can be at my job for longer. (6)

There were a few families in the sample where the spouse was committed to her own career and mobility for the ADF career made this difficult:

It's non-negotiable. This is what I do. I need to be sane – I have to go to work ... And moving time at our house is extremely stressful because we start the arguments – he says 'Well you know it's my career' and I go 'Yes, it may be your career, but you know I have a career too and the army isn't the be-all and end-all of everything and we both have to work and they need to understand that you have a family and as such, they need to be supportive of the fact that you have a family'. (9)

This participant made a plea for longer postings to slow the rate of mobility as a way to soften the effects of frequent moves, and help their family better reconcile the competing priorities.

Growing responsibilities within the extended family had started to curtail this mobile phase of life for a few participants:

Possibly the main reason would be [husband's] mother because his father passed away at the start of the year and she's down there... and my parents are in Tasmania as well and we thought "well they're both getting up in age as well and [someone's] getting up in age" so that's another pull to get us back down. (7)

More subtly, families reported a growing sense of the cumulative impact on their children's education and happiness from the sequence of moves that made them less willing to continue with the mobile lifestyle:

I do remember not so long ago telling the kids that 'you know, you should think yourselves very lucky because you get to see more of Australia than most people in their lifetimes. You've been around...' but I don't know that it's a really big pay off in comparison to five schools, five states, five years. (9)

To summarise this section, while these families in many ways are developing new skills, routines and mindsets that make moving easier, these are counteracted by changing circumstances, cumulative troubles and shifting tensions that can make moving less attractive, or harder. Each subsequent move in some ways carries the history and effects of past moves – for better and for worse. Moves at this rate are not independent experiences, but links in a chain.

To reflect on this section, the growing competence, skills and resources that these families accumulate over time in their motility tool box is matched to some degree by the accumulation of history and issues over moves which can decrease their motility as a social unit over time. A child's stress in one relocation becomes a large factor to consider in the next move. A wife's compromise around work prospects in one relocation continues in her employment history as lowered or frustrated prospects in her next. Moves are not lived as separate events, but rather as a chain of such events over time, for better and for worse.

The teacher effect

Before moving to consider the teacher interview data, this section draws together comments parents made about the effects of individual teachers in facilitating or complicating children's institutional transitions. These serial movers have encountered a variety of educational settings and teachers, so they have a breadth of experience in a variety of different settings behind their judgements. By their reports, a good teacher made a lot of difference to a child's transition. In their opinion, 'good' teachers ran ordered, productive classrooms, got results, made an effort to understand and address the particular child's needs, were responsive, motivated and supportive, and actively helped the child re-establish themselves academically:

So he moved up to Year 2 – oh he had the most fantastic teacher ... He was just gaga – every day of my life I thank God for Mrs [name], who was wonderful. She took this rabble of children and just... he loved school. I'd just managed to hang on in that job long enough to get him to Year 2 and I knew if he got Mrs [name] he'd be alright. 13

Now she was able to read a little bit...it's only through the work put in by us and her teachers after school that she's really good at it now. 15

Spoke to the headmaster, I spoke to everybody and they were just so wonderful and I just couldn't wait to get there ... The best one we've ever had. It was absolutely fantastic and it was the best school we've ever been to because there the teachers gave a crack about the kids. The education – fantastic, loved it – any troubles with any of the kids, they were quick to get onto it 21

Parent evaluations also reflected how they themselves were treated:

The principal here was good, he really listened to what I said about my children. 14

Parent assessments of individual teachers could play a role in school choice decisions:

Whereas the first full year that child number 2 had there, the teacher she had really pushed her and progressed her ... This one had such a fantastic teacher that I let her stay for the full year. It meant that I had to do two school drop offs and pick ups but her teacher was fantastic, she was great on the discipline and academically she just progressed probably two years worth when we looked at her reporting. 14

I went there and just had a chat to the teachers and was happy with the teacher he was allocated so we didn't end up even looking at any of the other schools.... [I was] Looking for motivated teachers, cohesive environments so that the conversations between the staff and the admin weren't strained at all;... it was a very motivated and very dedicated principal ... I met the teacher and had a chat with her and she was young and single and dedicated and motivated but had been teaching for six or eight years or similar and I was happy with everything she was saying about herself and her own happiness. 33

Some parents expressed a preference for an older teacher given their experience, and presumably more conservative educational values:

Teacher's very old-fashioned that Jennifer has now; she's been teaching for 35 years so she's an old-school teacher and she's really good. 26

An older teacher would have the experience and the understanding for that; 21

On the other hand, a relocation necessarily meant a new teacher, and a fresh perspective or innovative teacher strategy could also make a big difference:

Yeah, his teacher this year has been fantastic. The simplest thing she did – she got him a cardboard box and when he felt like he was going to explode, he went outside and tore up the cardboard box. He was going through and getting all the other children's books out and ripping them to pieces and stuff, which isn't fair to them, obviously, so she got him a cardboard box. The simplest thing and since then he's just ... onward and upward since then. 19

'Bad' teachers were typically characterised as lazy or inconsiderate:

[Daughter] just didn't want to be there because she couldn't grasp hold of the new world and her teacher was lazy – didn't give her the homework, didn't make them do the work, didn't really care but then on the last term, she got a new teacher – a male teacher, Mr [name], and he was fantastic (46:21)... 21

I've come across a few bad teachers; maybe [they need] just a little bit more of an understanding that these kids have... their whole lives have been uprooted – maybe that's it.

Lack of flexibility to accommodate the mobile child was considered another unhelpful quality:

I don't know that it's necessarily crook schools in general – it's individuals; some individuals are quite narrow minded ... The only thing is be a bit open-minded about placement. There tends to be a little bit of state rivalry I think, certainly what I got from this [daughter's] experience in trying to get her into Year 1 was that everyone in Queensland seemed to think that the Queensland education system was the way it was done and the best way it was done and there was no leeway or latitude either side.

Teacher turnover was reported by some parents as an unwanted and unhelpful complication, adding further disruption to their child's already disrupted schooling:

Year 3 they split the class – had two part-time teachers teaching one class ... then they did two terms and then they brought in another teacher who was just awful and she lasted half a term at this school.

13

While teacher turnover clearly jeopardises continuity in the child's education, these families' preference for fairly conservative pedagogies could also be interpreted as a way to manufacture continuity. Conservative pedagogical practices are more predictable than innovative pedagogies and more stable over time and place. Conservative pedagogies also resonate with the parents' own schooling, and may foster parents' confidence in being able to support their child at home. To summarise this section, these parents are very conscious that their choice of school will be as good as the teacher their child is allocated, and much rests on that individual's attributes and dispositions towards the mobile child. These parents are vigilant in monitoring their child's happiness and progress, and have high expectations of teachers, as does any parent, but perhaps more so, given the vulnerability of their child's educational progress across institutional discontinuities.

Parents' perspectives overview

The thematic analysis of the parent interview data has demonstrated how the policy landscape promoting choice in educational markets has added new layers and additional anxieties to the work of mobile ADF families. Schools are encouraged to differentiate and market themselves, while parents are encouraged to carefully choose between offerings on their own criteria. Mobile families have to research and make such decisions on short notice in unfamiliar markets. They rely heavily on the recommendations of their peer network and there is a brisk trade in school and teacher reputations. Nevertheless these families repeatedly undertake this work, and the additional 'homework' of assisting their children's social and academic transitions in the context in institutional discontinuities. Studies that investigate the school achievement of mobile children (for example, Engec, 2006; Simons, Bampton, Findlay, & Dempster, 2007)) fail to account for the work undertaken by their families, services and sympathetic teachers to guard against such risks as a variable impacting on outcomes.

The analysis has highlighted that these families seek and manufacture continuity, if not stability, and develop strategies, routines, mindsets and contingency plans that cultivate their motility. On the other hand, the academic and social consequences of institutional discontinuities can accumulate and undermine this motility, as they weigh the advantages of the ADF career against its costs for other family members. The next section presents a summary of the teachers' perspective of educational strategy for mobile ADF families. Where parents continually reference the particular individual child, teachers speak from a more generalised sense of the flow of ADF families through their school community – looking through different ends of the telescope.

3. Teachers and institutional discontinuities

Teachers' work is not independent of the institutions they work in. Rather the policy, procedures, routines and resource constraints of their setting will largely shape what they can and can't do as professionals. The intention here is to explore how 'viscous' the institution of schooling proves for these mobile families – that is, how the institution of schooling through its agents and routines might facilitate or complicate educational transitions in the coming and goings of mobile families. The highly viscous institution will presume a stable local population, thus the new arrival will pose a problem and disruption to school processes – it will feel like swimming through treacle. On the other hand, the institution with low viscosity will have well established practices and routines that will anticipate and welcome the mobile child as an important part of the school community, and facilitate the continuity of their education across school settings – like swimming through water. The degree of 'viscosity' thus attempts to describe an attribute of the institutional setting, its disposition towards mobility, so to speak. The lived reality then becomes a matter of how the motility resources and dispositions of the family interact with the viscosity of the institution. This distinction allows us to consider the very different scenarios of a high motility family in a low viscosity setting, a low motility family in a high viscosity setting, and other such combinations.

The section presents the educational strategies developed in schools for mobile ADF families, as reported by experienced teachers in primary schools with high ADF family enrolments. These schools experience a high turnover of students:

This school is middle socio-economic with I think about 10% of families would be defence families. We have a...not a really high turnover of families but there's consistently families moving out and new families moving in. (T3)

... We probably have about 45% of our enrolment that are defence. It's very transient. ... We just did a figure analysis,... we only had 75 students that have been here for three or more years, which is phenomenal when we have an enrolment of in excess of 400 students. (T9)

Given the strength of this demographic trend, these particular schools could be expected to exhibit and actively cultivate low viscosity in their routines and strategies to enable mobility. The schools' general policies will be reinterpreted by teachers within their classrooms, and in that translation, teacher's own assumptions and strategies may act as a filter and increase or decrease the viscosity of the institution. This means that there will be a diversity of practices within schools, some more helpful than others.

Principals in the selected schools were asked to nominate teachers in their school who had experience working with mobile ADF families. Two teachers were interviewed in each of the six schools visited. Of the twelve teachers interviewed, one was male, and the other eleven female. They all had considerable experience and were teaching across the primary years, from early childhood to upper primary. Each teacher was asked to describe what they do in their school or classes to assist mobile children make their educational transitions into and out of the school. They

also spoke about their professional challenges and learning accrued over time, and illustrated their general comments with particular examples where appropriate.

The teachers sampled were not a random sample. Rather they were selected because of their experience in working with mobile ADF families, thus could be expected to have cultivated low viscosity practices in their classrooms and professional dispositions. Their responses may not be representative of the broader teacher population, but will give access to the professional insight they have accrued over time from which others may benefit. The discussion below pulls out some of the themes in the teacher interviews, including how teachers think about mobile ADF families as a group, what they do for these students, how they build knowledge about the student, and what priorities they pursue in their strategies for the child's transition.

How do these teachers think about mobile ADF families?

These teachers were mindful, respectful and sympathetic to the variety of cumulative stresses mobile ADF families deal with, such as prolonged absences of the ADF member, married separated postings, relocation, and active duty:

If the dad's overseas...yeah it's nice to see them and you really worry about them because you've met them as a person. (T4)

He's also in Afghanistan at the moment. You know they do...I think she's virtually had to move on her own too because they've bought a house ... they're quite strong people. (T2)

But for the children, they've left behind a group of people...their network and so then they step in and they've got to go through that whole process again. (T3)

We see so many families coming and going and when they first come in many of them...you would think are kind of used to the moving but many of them are not and they find it quite difficult to come in and get settled, they're not sure how they're going to be welcomed. I haven't met anybody in all these families that are easy about it, it's always hard in one way or another ...they know it's coming, that it will happen and it still isn't easy for them. And not for the children either, even those children who come in and are quite self confident and who do seem to fit in quite well...but even for them they have this underlying concern whether they're going to be good enough. (T6)

Teachers were reluctant to generalise about ADF families or their needs, given the inevitable variety within that category:

And it's like with every child, I think you get the diversity in the army or out of the army. You've got kids who cope, you've got families who cope and those who don't cope very well. (T11)

This comment and others cut to the characteristic of most relevance to teachers being whether or not these children and families 'cope' with the demands of their mobile circumstances. This could be understood to refer to the household's relative motility in interaction with the necessity to move:

Other families you see...maybe when mum's not coping or families move up here and mum doesn't like the new place then it's a lot harder and they ... well the issues that the parents have you can see coming down onto the children.... Stresses that they come to school with when it's not really their issue it's just something that they picked up. (T12)

The implication is that the family unit that is not 'coping' produces additional demands in the classroom. One teacher self consciously invoked the label 'army brat' as a term used amongst parents and teachers at times, in particular for the unsettled child:

The parents of army kids know that that's what they get called. ... I'll use it myself, you know, some kids will come in and I'll go "oh here's another army brat"...it is a terrible thing to say but ... there are some kids who just do not adjust to moving around. ... Quite a lot of it is just 'look at me' type of behaviour, there's always attention seeking type behaviours. (T2)

The teachers also expressed concern about the characteristic prolonged absences of the ADF parent. The disruptions of parents coming and going from the household were seen to produce behavioural consequences that the teacher had to deal with on an immediate and ongoing basis:

For me it depends on the family and how the family deals with it. I had one particular student that's actually...her behaviour is better when her father is deployed and maybe...I think it goes beyond just their being home but the relationship in the family and all of a sudden the routines have changed...I think that's such an important thing with young children, these routines, and after to speaking to parents...mums particularly, that have gone nine months being the routine person so when one comes back to join the family unit and all those routines change and for young children I think that's the hard thing to cope with. (T11)

One teacher felt it then became her role to provide the continuity of everyday routines for the child:

You know, you've got to get into this routine and then sometimes when the husband's come back just for a week, sometimes it can just blow that routine to pieces and then you've got to start again and you know the kids wear all that and I think it's important to make yourself available to listen to the kids talk to you because sometimes you're that constant and the kids need that constant and I think teachers need to bear in mind that they might need to talk to you more than any other kid because you are the constant every day in their lives as well. That's something...I guess a bit of advice to keep an eye on them. (T2)

These teachers candidly described patterns they had noticed across their professional experience, and potentials they had learnt to be alert to, given their knowledge of the ADF lifestyle. By avoiding lumping all mobile ADF families into one category, and distinguishing more by indications of how family members are 'coping' with the move, they offer a rationale for sensitive support that avoids blaming the child as an individual, but rather appreciates the broader context to their classroom needs.

The teachers generally reported a heightened appreciation of the ADF and the sacrifices they make on behalf of the general population. Some described the pride engendered by the many uniforms on display at school community events such as the ANZAC Day school assembly. It should also be reported that one teacher recounted a very damaging encounter with an ADF father, who was threatening and hostile in his interactions with school staff when consulted about his child's unsettled behaviour. This phenomenon of aggressive masculinity has been documented elsewhere as a problematic characteristic in military occupations, but is beyond the focus of this study. Nevertheless, this encounter had severely shaken this teacher and damaged her confidence in working with defence families.

What have these teachers learnt to do for mobile families?

In terms of conscious strategy, these teachers talked about exercising an extra degree of watchfulness and close observation, monitoring the child's emotional state, and more broadly, how the parents and family as a whole are coping with the move:

I guess with the parents, being a friendly face and letting them know that you're sensitive towards... you know that the fact that they are moving around all the time and just being aware that they may become emotional and that sort of thing.... I guess same with any child but you might just be a bit more careful I guess, a bit more...you just be a bit more aware, you've just got to be aware that they may have an off day but you're going to take into account why, they're not just ... something you do automatically I think. (T7)

The emotional radar and tactful sensitivity were considered particularly important in the first stages of contact:

Just being very positive and just keeping your ears open to what they're saying and I think it's important not to judge too soon because they're going through such an emotional state from just moving so you may not necessarily be getting the person that they normally are straight away and I think just sort of allowing them to have some input into how their child has been learning and I think just pulling back a little bit and allowing them to come to you first to sort of put out where they're at and then sort of coming to the party then saying how we do things here (T8)

Teachers reported working closely with the dedicated Defence School Transition Aide in this regard:

I think it's just the communication once they first arrive, making the parents feel safe a bit, when their child is as well and relaxed. And your school based defence [transition aide]... They play such a key role in helping parents; they're wonderful.... she will come to me because she knows what's going on. She keeps an eye on everyone and just quietly asks "how's this person going" and then she takes them out and does some work with each child about...when special occasions are coming up like father's day or something, she writes letters and takes photos and they send them across. So she does a lot of work with the children as well. (T11)

This is quiet, unobtrusive strategy and effort that parents and children may not be aware of. Some teachers also described more active, interventionist strategies aimed at subtly easing the child into social networks:

Yeah you're monitoring and you're asking virtually at the end of each recess and lunch "how was recess, how was lunch", quietly walking around the yard to make sure ... my new student, this year, had difficulty in the first couple of weeks so quietly I just asked someone to be her pal for the day until she eventually settled in...well found her niche of friends but it took quite a while...but she wasn't distressed, she just tended to be playing on her own.... you need to make sure and make the rest of the class aware without her knowing that she needs to be included in games even if she says no, it's nice to be asked. Just those simple things.... I chose some friends that I thought would be suitable for

this girl and then approached those parents and asked “would it be ok if I passed your number onto this new family to invite her over to play” and that was fine. (T11)

One teacher described her conscious effort to proactively communicate frequently with parents of newly arrived students in the early stages, mindful of their concerns, and how that investment can build trust:

There is a lot more correspondence, I have to say, in the beginning with teachers and...well with myself anyway. So quite often I will email the parent...but that's not just limited to defence as well, that's what I'd do for any child that really comes through that doesn't start at the beginning of the year. I just inform them of how the child's settling in and I find if I'm proactive with that then a lot of the teething problems that the parent might have anxiety about is dismissed quite early. Like if there aren't any issues rather than the parent get worried...but that is defence as well as, for want of a better word, civilian families. (T9)

These teachers demonstrate an emotional intelligence here that respectfully acknowledges the heightened anxieties around changing schools that the parents expressed. These experienced teachers have learnt to understand the family unit's stresses around relocation, and accommodate and dignify their concerns, rather than dismiss them.

What are the teachers' priorities?

There was a strong theme across the teacher data around facilitating the child's social integration as the immediate priority, and a working principle that once the child is happily settled in friendships and classroom routines, academic matters can be addressed:

I think for the children it's really important just to make sure that it's a happy place before anything else and that learning can come...I think the social elements are really, really important. (T8)

The social is so important; if you're not socially confident ... you're not going to do any good at school. The academic will come later but the academic if you're socially worried, if you're feeling insecure, you're academic isn't going to happen. (T3)

I think most important thing at primary level is socialisation first, in the first term and not to be so stressed about academics because if they're not happy they weren't going to learn anyway. So just making sure they're happy to start with and to key up some...where it's possible invite friends over to play. (T11)

The biggest thing I suppose I focus on is getting them a support group within the classroom. So if I've known my class for quite a period of time then so I try to match up so to speak students that would be good companions and friends for those new students that arrive. Because I find that's your biggest problem...parents' initial concern is they want them to have friends, they want them to feel part of the class and I think that's really important for defence kids because they are so transient. (T9)

An orientation and familiarisation with the school environment was also considered an important reception strategy. This includes showing the student the spatial layout, and also making explicit school expectations, rather than assuming that students will understand these unwritten rules:

Usually those in the first five weeks...well not just for defence families but for all children, it's a get to know you group, it's a get to know the school rules, it's a get to know...because not only do we have defence families we also have a lot of children that every year will come from schools like I think children move a lot more than they used to. (T9)

To summarise thus far, the teachers generally describe conscious but low key, responsive strategies and routines that serve to induct, embed and normalise newly arrived students as members within their new community of peers. The teachers' typical priority around social integration coheres with parents' similar immediate concern and general belief that a happy child can get on with learning. It should be noted that these teachers worked in primary schools, where teachers spend the majority of the day with the same class group. Whether such close monitoring or subtle social engineering is possible in secondary settings with their more fractured day, staffing and timetabling is another matter. This set of institutional conditions in secondary school unfortunately coincides with the pattern of eroding motility as children get older.

How do these teachers build knowledge of the mobile child?

Teachers' have access to professional expertise, vocabularies and tools with which to assess the incoming students' levels and needs. Most teachers described their school routine of formal diagnostic testing in the child's first week 'just to see whereabouts they're at' (T11).

Some teachers considered the previous school report to be the most reliable indicator of the child's performance, while others made the effort to contact the previous school to discuss the child's academic and behavioural record. In the following quote, a teacher quickly summarised the variety of actions she undertakes for a newly arrived student. Her capacity to speak in general terms suggests a well-oiled routine that anticipates and facilitates such transitions, that is, the work that cultivates a low-viscosity environment.

Academically speaking; obviously testing. I usually ask for the previous school report, ... When it comes to behaviour, yes we communicate with the previous school. I ask for previous school reports just to give some sort of idea in that first week of February/the last week of January when school begins. I make a point of any new child having a couple of buddies that will last a week and hopefully they'll make a friendship, sometimes they do, sometimes they don't so they get switched around...so they know what the school routine is, where to go, where do we wait for mum and dad, where do we sit when the first bell goes at 8.30, all those routines. We do a lot of testing in the first two weeks to assess every child. (T1)

The teachers also described their own work of informal observations, ongoing monitoring and formative assessments of students' needs:

It means a whole lot of complex things that the teachers have to deal with and it ranges from not just the kids coming in and out at different times of the year ... complexities along finding where the children are at with their learning, making sure that what the teachers are doing meets the learning needs of the kids. (T6)

This is unpredictable workload that has to be managed whenever a new student arrives:

We have a lot of students that will come part way through the year, we have a lot of students that leave early, lots of students if they start to be...if they're being posted they usually leave around November, so they leave early and then we can have children filtering in at any time really throughout the year. So teacherwise you could have lots of class disruption where you have your class set, you have your group set and then all of a sudden you have a new enrolment...routine set, you got a new enrolment. So there is a lot of, I suppose, catching up on learning about the students that are arriving at the school because you have to read their files and the reports and everything else. (T9)

Teachers can only work with the information they have access to. There was one criticism of the portfolio of student work as an indicator of the student's capacities, given its selectivity and display of exemplary, as opposed to routine, work. Similarly, some teachers had learnt to be wary of parents' self-reports of their children's ability:

In terms of education...I've had some kids' [parents] who will come and say, 'They'll be quite a high level' but we find that's generally not the case and whether...a lot of the kids have come from smaller areas, more rural areas where the defence posts have been so...in a small school, maybe high achievers there but when they come into a bigger they haven't quite ...reached that level ...you know, initially parents have said, "yeah they'll be very high achievers" but it doesn't pan out that way.... they weren't kids that needed learning support but they just weren't necessarily an A, they might have been a B. (T1)

Other teachers talked about how families could understandably choose to suppress information in the hope of their child getting a fresh start at the new school, without labelling or a reputation continuing from past settings:

Some students I suppose come to you a bit unknown as well because...not in all cases but if some students have diagnosis some parents would like to start fresh again. (T9)

I usually ask for the previous school report, I usually get that but if I don't, I question why not, they usually have a good reason why they don't give it to me... Which is fair enough but we need something that will help us. (T1)

While sympathetic to the strategy, these experienced teachers were nevertheless alert to the gap in school records.

Transitions in and out of the school thus create work for teachers, but in these schools with highly mobile populations, there seems to be a matter-of-factness about the nature of this work, and no explicit grudges against the workload implications of the mobile child's coming and going. In these schools, student mobility is sufficiently predictable for the teachers to be able to talk in generalised terms – they have seen a series of students coming and going, and have achieved a sense of what to expect and how to respond. This valuable generalised professional know-how however could risk being heard by anxious parents as dismissive of the particular singularities of their child. The accounts given above of a process of getting to know the child as a learner, while being mindful and watchful of the context of family stressors, should help parents understand that teachers will be investing effort over time and that both parties should ensure that the conversation around their child's needs continues beyond initial placement discussions.

Manufacturing continuity

The parents described various strategies for manufacturing continuity across educational transitions. Teachers similarly hoped to achieve continuity, but did not have access to knowledge of what went before as parents would, and had to rely on the former school or parents to provide that history:

And if there's a special program being started please send that so that they're not restarting all again, it's too hard. It's too important to start again.... Even in gifted children, if you've starting something and their grasping it and it's really interesting to them, let us know because the continuation of that is important. (T5)

This desire to foster continuity between the previous and the current setting needs to be matched by a similar desire to ensure that such history travels with the child when they next move on, that is continuity between the current and future settings. The teachers' accounts understandably were concerned with their responsibilities for the local here-and-now, but could benefit from a wider perspective on how their practice forms part of the chain of settings in this child's educational journey. They spoke as receivers, not as senders in turn.

Year placement strategies

As with the parents, teachers reported discontinuous year placement decisions to be particularly vexed, 'extremely difficult' (T10) professional judgements, usually entrusted to school managers. The classroom teachers interviewed typically did not play a role in making the decision as such, but could describe the daily consequences of problematic placements and ongoing negotiations around them and the limited range of placement possibilities. Like parents, teachers described the initial challenge of competing social and academic considerations, and a general preference to place children with their age peers for social reasons:

Children very much come in on an age level to where they fit in because I think the social aspect is just as important as the academic. And I think that would probably be a successful transition in a lot of ways because the students are at that same level socially. Just as developmentally they might be going through similar stages, keeping the academic side aside. (T8)

In addition, the teachers described how such professional decisions were further complicated by the strength of parents' advocacy around this issue, producing another professional dilemma between working in partnership with parents, and staying true to their own professional assessment of the child's case:

It was, for us as teachers here – we didn't have a problem with slotting the children into where they should be...taking them at where they're at and prior schooling and that sort of thing but parents were very much – they knew where their child should be and regardless of where they fitted within the education system [in this state] they wanted a particular year level. (T10)

Teachers could recount a variety of problematic placement scenarios:

I had one young girl that arrived and...because she was in a higher class in another state but was actually the same year level as our lower grade, they requested that she go up a grade ...they thought

she was far greater ... than what she really was and socially she was more suited to the year that we'd put her in. ... They stayed in the one recommended and it was fine. I think... on one occasion they had a couple of children start in a year but realise they had to go up. So pretty straight on you can see where they need to be. We've had others...parents were convinced that they needed to be in a higher level and they ended up doing that year again, they just couldn't cope. (T11)

I think he went into year 1 regardless because that's what the parents wanted and the principal said that's fine but he did struggle in year one because in transition here we learn to read, they'll be able to count, they're making numbers up to twenty, it's quite formal and he...he could barely write his name so. (T12)

There was a child that was put in...there were two, both situations...one was put in a higher class and then it was realised that after a while, well actually they should have been put a year lower and that child was then repeated within the school... They did half of the year because again they came halfway through the year they ... ¾ of the year I suppose and then after a while I questioned the placement of the child and it was then after further discussions with the parents that that child didn't actually have a formal year of preschool ... So the child had only had, actually, one year of formal schooling when you related it to our own system and then straight into year 3. So he struggled terribly.... age was fine but it was in fact experience in formal schooling that was lacking by at least 12 to 6 months. (T9)

A boy started in my class and for different reasons he was only in my class for one day and then he went to another class because it was seen that...he lived actually across the road from another child in the other class and we thought that would help him and be good for him to have somebody in the school. It doesn't happen very often though. (T2)

These war stories of disputed decisions and their resolutions understandably served to validate these experienced teachers' professional judgements and expertise: '*pretty straight on you can see where they need to be*' (T11). They do have substantial knowledge of the local benchmarks, academic criteria for year levels and what counts as relevant indicators. For teachers the educational space within a year grade is also conceived broadly and can accommodate a wide range of developmental and academic needs. Like their attitude to curricular repetition, perhaps this professional appreciation of the capacity of a year level program to accommodate diversity could more profitably be shared with parents.

To reflect on this section, the teachers' accounts focus on fitting the child into the here-and-now of their local system offerings. Though elsewhere these teachers are mindful of the high mobility of the ADF population, their accounts of year placement negotiations do not raise any considerations of the family's future mobility routes, and the impact of their local here-and-now decisions on the child's trajectory back into other state systems in the future. Where normalising the child in terms of peer age in the immediate local setting is reported as the usual operative principle, it may not be relevant after the next move, but rather may prove a complication in the child's educational trajectory.

Academic strategies

In regard to curricular discontinuities, teachers considered a 'gap' of missing curriculum more problematic than a wrinkle of repetition of work previously encountered:

R: When you perceive a gap do you feel obliged to try and fill that gap? Like does it create a pressure on you to compensate in the curriculum?

T: It does a bit, sometimes it's a bit of extra work.

R: And the flipside ... when you're doing stuff that the kid's already done?

T: Yeah but that doesn't worry me so much because kids forget. I mean I know because I've had say Grade 5 and then a Grade 6 the next year and I've had some similar kids and I say "no we can do that", I know for a fact that I taught it last year but it's like we have done that, I know but the kids forget...and sometimes that is good because it builds their self esteem because they know about that topic because they've done it somewhere else and that can be a good thing as well because they can contribute to the class, they can be seen as a bit of an expert in something because they know about it and that can be a good thing for them. (T2)

There will be times where they will have known the topic areas which can be good...using their field of knowledge, their prior knowledge and it can make them feel more at ease because they go "oh we know something about this" and the tutor can see that they know something about the topic so... I did work with one [parent] ... that did have high expectations...I sort of had to explain to her that he's still going very well but not...really didn't require a change of program (T1)

A gap needs to be filled, whereas a wrinkle can bestow confidence, and prove to be a positive experience. Such tolerance and value in revisiting curricular content by teachers contrasts with the parent accounts of curricular repetition as wasted time carrying a risk of boredom and disengagement. This contrast indicates different appreciations of processes of learning, and the potential space within curriculum for reinforcement, extension and elaboration. These professional tactics and insights could productively be shared to allay parent anxieties.

In regard to the 'little thing' of handwriting styles that produces considerable stress for young students and their parents, the experienced teachers interviewed were largely sympathetic and accommodating of other styles:

It's expected that they do [change their handwriting style], yeah ... No I don't [agree with that] because I just think it's...I don't see, personally, the huge emphasis on handwriting. I agree that children's handwriting needs to be legible and you need to be able to read it obviously and there needs to be an element of neatness about it but in regards to the actual style of the letters, I don't think it's that important. Like you pick up any text and there's different fonts in all books you read so I don't think it's that important ... More for neatness and presentation reasons. It is expected though, and it is part of our curriculum, that they have a writing style ... so it is expected that they write like that. Well it's [like] asking a right-handed person to start writing with their left hand isn't it? You're teaching them to do a b one way and then they get here and they've got to do it another way. And like they are only very young when they're in early childhood so it's a huge expectation. (T9)

This shows judicious discretion and a willingness to weigh the relative importance of this matter in the larger scheme of things. The flexibility these teachers report contrasts with parent narratives of inflexible, insensitive demands to change by teachers, so there may well be a range of attitudes and practices in schools, or perhaps the potential flexibility in teachers' approaches could be more explicitly communicated to students and parents.

What do/might these schools do for mobile ADF families?

The experience of schooling is more than what happens within the classroom. This section considers aspects of the broader school culture that these teachers considered relevant to their school's response to mobile ADF families.

Given the predictably high turnover associated with their concentration of ADF families, the particular schools sampled were resourced with the position of a Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) funded by the DCO. This designated go-between role is a cross-institutional response that formally recognises the particular stresses and demands of educational transitions on ADF families. Like the parents, all the teachers interviewed highly valued the facilitative work the DSTAs do:

I think your defence transition aide plays a big part. We've always had really good people in that position who are really active in what they do, how they communicate with families and making them feel welcome and if they couldn't catch the teacher they'd be happy to talk to her and pass on their concerns ... I think also our principal has given her extra hours in that role so the school's actually funded for more hours of her because we see it as such an important role that she does. (T12)

Workplace cultures that endorse and embed this para-professional role in their professional routines could be considered to be low viscosity institutional settings that recognise the predictable flow in their population and invest in proactive problem-solving to facilitate comings and goings. Their support for the role demonstrates how moving in and on is considered normal in these schools' culture.

The teachers also talked more broadly of aspects of the general school culture and ethos that welcomes newcomers into the community:

I guess put stuff in place to make them acclimatize firstly...I guess you can bring them in first and then whether that continues after you bring them in, include them in the school and make them feel part of the school. I guess then provide an ongoing opportunity for kids who do have issues, to be able to help them work through it so...but really make them feel welcome, part of the school...I think they're pretty good at that, actually getting them in...it's a very friendly school too; you've just got to walk around and most teachers will say hello to the kids around the place and the kids will say hi back. (T1)

One teacher's advice to other schools experiencing growing mobility recommended extending the welcome and inclusion to newly arrived parents in the school community as well, recognising mobility as the common life circumstance that ironically binds this community together:

Being adaptable and flexible, allowing opportunities for new parents to meet each other and for existing families to maybe meet new families, which I think we could do a lot better ... so people can talk about the same experiences that they're having as a new parent. (T11)

The DSTA strategy and the welcoming inclusive ethos demonstrate how the institution of the school need not fit a rigid template, but does have some capacity to be mindful and responsive to the nature and needs of a particular community. Traditionally large social institutions such as school systems have been able to dictate the terms and conditions on which they are prepared to engage with the community. These teachers however describe a more responsive institution which is willing

to adapt and accommodate the special needs of a particular community. This flexibility will be constrained by mandated curriculum guidelines and departmental edicts. Such 'non-negotiables' featured in parent narratives as the institutional brick walls they encountered that close down any negotiation. The next section explores in more detail where these teachers had nevertheless learnt to find degrees of flexibility that allowed them to cultivate low viscosity practices.

Where is the flexibility for low viscosity schooling?

Firstly, some teachers talked about how they approached relationships with ADF parents differently given their particular circumstances, and were prepared to share power over decisions in the interest of building trust over time:

Flexibility – in the sense of not sticking the children into a box to start with; being flexible with their placement because then the parents see that as a win for them because they're thinking we haven't made this decision – we've given them the opportunity to say 'We'll give it four weeks and we'll see how this child fits in there'. Be aware that it's very stressful for the parents and if it means that you've got to do that and say 'Okay, well, we'll give it a...' Do that. It's worth doing because the parents see you as being accommodating; you're accommodating their stress. ... they're away from all their family, everything's expensive, there's not as much to do ... and the weather's terrible. Give them that little bit of leeway if it means that in the end, you're going to have a much better relationship with them, the children are going to be better for it because mum and dad are less stressed. ... go with the flow in that sense. (T10)

I think there is just such a critical need to make sure that everything possible is done to build relationships with those families, that we make sure that they are welcomed, that they know what our curriculum's going to be like wherever possible before they actually come to the interview so we make sure that they have those hand books that sort of do outline a little bit what to expect, that they have that knowledge upfront and I think we mentioned the other day how important that website is, that people will look at it. So I think that relationship building and that knowledge of what the school could well be like... I think making them feel that the school will listen first and work with them that is a decision around the needs of the child. We do have the guidelines that show what year level they should go into but it's about the individual child. (T6)

Another teacher had learnt to listen more carefully to what these parents knew about their child, and to be prepared to put aside her professional status at times:

You need to listen to parents, you need to communicate...the parents know these children better than we do by a million percent so you need to listen...they also need to look for signs of a child behaving differently some days, just not coping and actually be there for them...actually be a person, be human. (T5)

Some teachers described how they had learnt to expect and plan for uncertainty and flexibility, or in one teacher's terms, 'Don't be too set in your ways':

So at the start of the year we could end up with an extra 50 kids who turn up on our doorstep on that last week of the school holidays and everything we had in place in December goes out the window; we start from scratch again. Because of that, we have quite a few composite classes within our school and what would normally happen is that child whom we might be a bit iffy about their placement,

would go into that class and we would say to the parents 'We have a four week period where we are going to assess your child, we're going to see how they fit socially and emotionally as well as academically within that class and then we will decide whether they are a three or a four or a two or a three based on what we've seen'. Most of the time parents were willing to go with that and were happy enough with it. (T10)

This teacher's description of her school's conscious strategy of a four week assessment period with the child placed in a composite class is a valuable example of low viscosity practice in a responsive institution. The strategy draws softer, blurred boundaries between grade levels, and defuses the high stakes/ high emotions decision of year placement on first contact.

To produce a low viscosity system, that is, one in which students can move easily with a minimum of fuss, ideally the web of institutional discontinuities in curricula, handwriting style, schooling phase ages, etc. would have to be overcome. One teacher succinctly described such an ideal scenario:

I think the sooner they come out with the national curriculum and the national starting age these children won't have these issues, they'll be able to move freely and their parents may hopefully solve a few of those issues. (T5)

It should be noted that Australia is working towards such goals with bipartisan support, but it is proving to be a difficult, politically sensitive process. Meanwhile this teacher, for one, is conscious that the issues that these families wear on a private base, are not of their own making, but rather the product of contradictions between public institutions.

Solutions beyond the school

Parents expressed opinions about what kind of teacher helped the educational transition. Similarly the teachers had seen many ADF families come and go, and had formed opinions of whether the family members were 'coping' or not with the mobility. When asked to offer advice to mobile families on how to negotiate successful educational transitions, some teachers spoke not to educational strategy, but more to the motility tool kit of families, that is, how they might adjust and optimise their dispositions to support their mobility:

T: Ok well my advice is to get involved as you can in the community ... because I think you can be a bit isolated if it's just going to be the defence community...oh defence community's important as well but I think you need to sort of branch out of your defence community into the local community and I think that's where acceptance comes ... and that's where the kids, particularly when they come to school, that's where they meet...you know they can go to sporting clubs out in the community, they can meet new kids and...you know the majority I think of the defence kids can fit in but a lot of it comes from the parents. (T2)

I just believe that if the parents are supportive and they make an effort to fit in, to move on, to fit in...sure you miss your people in the last place you were at but you do have to keep on moving on, you do have to keep on meeting new people and I think if the kids see that the parents can do this then they adapt better themselves. (T2)

From what I've seen they seem to cope with that and that might be families might have to approach this as "this is a new adventure". (T3)

This section has presented the issues associated with educational transitions from the teachers' end of the telescope. These experienced teachers had developed a sympathetic appreciation of the ADF lifestyle and its cumulative pressures, and aimed to work unobtrusively to monitor and promote the happiness of the child, and the family more broadly. This was described as subtle ongoing work which required the professional disposition of emotional intelligence, patience, responsiveness and flexibility. The DSTA role as a formal embedded institutional response was regarded as an essential support in this effort. Similarly a welcoming, inclusive school culture, and capacity to work with uncertainty and unpredictability helped nurture a low viscosity environment. The teachers talked about considering the family unit as a whole, in order to understand the child as an individual. They were alert to whether or not family members were 'coping' with the move, and its impact on the child in their care. Teachers conducted their own assessments of student ability, through formal and informal modes, and would trust their own professional judgements, rather than rely wholly on parents' referrals.

Teachers' work in facilitating educational transitions could be considered to operate on two dimensions. Firstly, they worked to normalise the child's experience, and help them fit and blend into the here-and-now of their new setting by spelling out school routines, helping the child form friendships, and addressing curricular gaps. Secondly, the teachers also work to acknowledge the difference of these children's circumstances – with extra care in monitoring and proactive relationship building with the parents. The low viscosity school emerges as a responsive institution that willingly adapts and accommodates, rather than dictate and impose terms on these mobile families.

Reflecting on the teachers' accounts as a group, they understandably concentrated on the immediate concerns of their local settings and their professional zone of influence, and did not actively factor in how placement decisions and educational experience in the here-and-now might impact on future moves. With these serial mover families, each setting should be considered a temporary not final destination. Perhaps teachers need to consider their role as both receivers and despatchers, and extend their duty of care to ensuring and promoting continuity into the next setting, not just from the previous.

The professional insights and dispositions these experienced teachers have developed could profitably be shared both with new staff members in high mobility schools, and staff in schools experiencing increasing mobility.

4. Dialogues to promote continuity

Teachers and ADF parents draw their knowledge bases from different but equally legitimate premises when they meet around a table. This report has suggested that their perspectives are like opposite ends of a telescope. Teachers accrue experience of multiple children's progress at different ages or stages and a breadth of coping strategies to inform their practice, predictions and judgement. They also have detailed knowledge of their particular setting and its institutional constraints. Teachers vicariously experience the volume of cases flowing through their schools, and witness the lived experiments of many children. The comings and goings of ADF families becomes a routine event for these particular schools. In contrast, each move is a high stakes, one-off experiment for the parents. They have the depth of detailed knowledge about their particular child and their child's individual progress through a sample of alternative settings. This experience of alternative settings means the parents can imagine how things might be otherwise, so they may appear to be critical or wary customers. Teachers necessarily rely on the parents and previous schools to fill in their knowledge gap around what went before if productive continuity is to be achieved. The two forms of wisdom and focal depth need to work together in a process of dialogic, contextualised problem-solving, rather than take up rigid adversarial positions.

These families cannot presume the stability for their children's education that many other families take for granted. In its place, they seek continuity and work hard to manufacture this in multiple ways. Experienced teachers similarly work to achieve continuity within the constraints of their setting, for example by stepping up to maintain routines when ADF postings disrupt the home, or being flexible about writing styles to accommodate the child's previous learning, so such 'little things' don't become 'big things'. Continuity becomes particularly important when there are special needs or supplementary programs that are started in one setting. Schools and teachers working with such mobile families have to extend their duty of care beyond the here-and-now to ensure an explicit hand over of such professional knowledge so the mobile child need not suffer from institutional discontinuities. In other words there needs to be professional dialogues promoting continuity across institutional boundaries, not just between parents and teachers, to connect what goes before with what comes after.

To conclude, this analysis has introduced the variables of family motility and institutional viscosity. The former refers to how the family is disposed towards, and resourced for, mobility; the latter refers to how easy the institution makes it for people to come and go from its community. The following table breaks these variables down to degrees of high and low, and cross-tabulates them to describe possible combinations of circumstances. This schema might help families, schools and their support services think about the variety of factors at play and how they can interact for better and for worse.

Table 2

Cross-tabulating motility and viscosity

V+/-, M +/-	Low motility M- (dislikes moving, lacks skills to cope with demands of moving)	High motility M+ (Willing to move, and has skills to cope with the demands)
Low viscosity V- (institutional culture facilitates and supports mobility - like swimming through water)	1. V-M- Helpful combination if family having to move	2. V-M+ Well matched and mutually supportive
High viscosity V+ (institutional culture hinders or ignores mobility – like swimming through treacle)	3. V+M- Not a problem if not moving Highly problematic if having to move	4. V+M+ Might move on if not happy

Cell 1 (V-M-), the combination of the low motility family moving through a low viscosity setting is a potentially helpful combination, the attributes of the institution helping the family ‘cope’ better by removing institutional obstacles and facilitating the necessary processes. Cell 2 (V-M+), the high motility family moving through the low viscosity setting, is the optimal scenario for mobile families – they are well resourced themselves and also well supported by the institution to move on. Cell 3 (V+,M-), the low motility family who don’t cope well with moving, in a high viscosity setting that has not developed a culture that normalises and supports mobility, is a highly problematic combination. While they are not well equipped to ‘cope’ themselves, their institution will fail to actively support if not hinder their mobility. Of course on the flipside, if the family is not forced to move, there is no problem and the two attributes are well matched. This combination might describe the circumstances for many ‘stable’ families in schools with low turnover. Cell 4, high motility families in high viscosity settings will make for critical customers who will not hesitate to move on to a better, more supportive school if they feel it is warranted. The current marketisation policies in education actively encourage such behaviour.

Through this frame, it is interesting to re-consider how the ADF families read the presence of a DSTA in a school, when trawling websites of schools in their next location. The presence of a DSTA ultimately served as a flag that marked the school as one that nurtured a low viscosity culture– a school that welcomed mobile populations and had built up expertise, insight and routines to support their mobility. As more Australians become more mobile, and market competition increases, more schools may consider putting out such a welcome mat, because not all mobile families will have the same resources and employer supports that ADF families do.

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