

Student mobility - reasons, consequences and interventions

Dr. Reesa Sorin Rosemary Iloste
James Cook University/ Education Queensland

Abstract:

Mobility in education can mean families moving from city to city or state to state as employment and housing changes for them. However, it can also mean families moving their children from one school to another within the same area, for other, more personal reasons. As student mobility increases, concerns about its impact on the young learner increase (Wright, 1999). Research studies report mobile students to be lower achievers in academic as well as social domains of schooling (Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Wright, 1999).

Student mobility can adversely affect children's success rate in school, leading to lower levels of engagement and reduced chance of high school completion. This research investigated student mobility in Cairns, where mobility rates increase each year. This included factors in families' lives that appear to give rise to mobility; perceptions of the effects of mobility on children, families and schools; and intervention strategies to address perceived negative effects of mobility. This paper discusses findings based on interviews with families and school personnel in five state primary schools.

Introduction

Mobility in schools means students relocating from one school to another during their years of study, often causing inconsistency or interruption in the educational experience of the student (Ligon & Paredes, 1992, in Fisher et al, 2002). It can mean families moving from city to city or state to state as employment and housing changes for them. But it can also mean families moving their children from one school to another within the same area for other, more personal reasons. A mobile student is further described (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training and Department of Defence, [DEST and Def], 2000) as "a student who moves school more than twice in a three year period" or "patterns of family movement that involve students in relocating school, or periods of time when they do not attend school" (p.2).

Why is mobility an important issue?

In the United States, student mobility rates range between 25 and 40 percent in suburban schools and between 45 and 80 percent in inner-city schools (Skandera & Sousa, 2002). Martin (2002) reported that approximately one quarter of United States' students change schools three or four times over the course of a public school career. By the end of third grade, one out of six children in the United States have attended three or more schools, often changing schools more than once during the school year (American Youth Forum, 2002). Mobile students are frequently from low-income families and ethnic minorities (Audette et al, 1993; Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000; Skandera & Sousa, 2002; Wright, 1999). Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber (1996, in Wright, 1999) also note that "higher income student frequently transferred into and out of the district, whereas lower income student more often transferred within the district" (p. 347). Astone and McLanahan (1994, in Rumberger & Larson, 1998) further say that students from single parent and step-parent families are more likely to change schools and less likely to complete high school than those from two parent families.

Australia has one of the most highly mobile populations in the western world (Settles, 1993, in Fields, 1997). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001, in DEST and Def, 2002) estimated that, within the overall Australian population, 30 percent of residents from

households with children moved at least once over a three year period, with an increasing proportion of this relocation being movement between one State or Territory and another. Australians in general move more than eleven times during their lifetimes (Bell, 1995, in Fields, 1997). Regional areas such as Cairns record slightly higher moves (42%) than urban areas (40%).

What causes mobility?

Research in the area of mobility cites a number of factors that contribute to student mobility. According to Rumberger and Larson (2002) these factors are either family-based or school-based. Their research found that “some students change schools without moving, whereas other students move without changing schools” (p.8). Glick (1993, in Fields, 1997) further defined moves as forced, where families are displaced due to evictions or natural disasters; imposed, where changes in the family, including divorce or death precede the move; and unforced, where relocations occur for closer proximity to family or friends, starting a new job or moving to a bigger dwelling.

Family based reasons for mobility are mainly due to employment, lifestyle and housing changes, family changes (DEST and Def, 2002; Fields, 1997), income (Martin, 2002; Wright, 1999) and ethnic minority (Family Housing Fund, 2002; Rumberger and Larson, 1998). Employment moves are usually the result of one or both parents’ work commitments or their seeking employment, which requires relocation of the family to another geographical area (DEST and Def, 2002).

Lifestyle-related movement, where a family makes a conscious decision to relocate to a larger home or better climate account for a large number of moves (DEST and Def, 2000). A study by Mantzicopoulos and Knutson (2000) found that 66 percent of families said they moved because they were looking for a better place to live. Housing changes, due to instability in the housing market, eviction, or a lack of adequate low income housing (Fisher et al, 2002; Mantzicopoulos and Knutson, 2002; Martin, 2002) and home ownership (Skandera and Sousa, 2002) also account for a number of moves of families with children.

Changes to the family that might serve as antecedents to mobility include: financial or social difficulties, death, divorce, separation, disharmony or conflict (Astone and McLanahan, 1994; DEST and Def, 2002; Fisher et al, 2002; Rumberger and Larson, 1998). Family dysfunction can also lead to children becoming state wards or being placed in foster care (DEST and Def, 2002). Some family moves may also be culturally-related, due to cultural ceremonies, family business or recreational activities (DEST and Def, 2002).

Low family income is a determining factor for mobility (Audette, Algozzine and Warden, 1993; Family Housing Fund, 2002; Fisher et al, 2002; Skandera and Sousa, 2002). According to Skandera and Sousa (2002), Children from low income families or children who attend inner-city schools are more likely to have changed schools frequently than those from middle to high income families. Further, Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (1996, in Wright, 1999) state that “higher income students frequently transferred into and out of the district, whereas lower income student more often transferred within the district” (p. 347).

Ethnic minority groups are often cited as more mobile (DEST and Def, 2002; Family Housing Fund, 2002; Wright, 1999). In Australia, there are a significant number of Indigenous students with high mobility rates, often with patterns of movement centred on a ‘base’ school, and intermittent travel to other locations in which enrolment in school may or may not occur (DEST & Def, 2002). McCrae et al (2000) reported on three Commonwealth funded projects that focused specifically on Indigenous mobility. Of the 793 Indigenous students from 76 participating schools, there were 1039 movements (both in and out and including transition from primary to secondary school, in a 9 month period.

School-based reasons for mobility feature less prominently in the literature. Yet schools are at least partly responsible for student mobility (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, in Rumberger & Larson, 1998). School issues such as social adaptability, engagement in curricula, academic difficulty and safety may all lead to mobility in the student population (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Additionally, time absent from school, misbehaviour and low educational expectations were found to relate to students changing schools or dropping out of school before completing high school (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Kerbow (1996, in Rumberger & Larson, 1998) found that 40 percent of primary school student who changed schools did not change residences. With figures such as this, schools' roles in student mobility cannot be ignored. As Rumberger & Larson (1998) note, "Schools are at least partly responsible for high student turnover and, consequently, should help address the problem" (p. 1).

Effects of Mobility

Mobility affects all stakeholders, from students and their families to school personnel and system functioning. There are some benefits related to mobility (DEST and Def, 2002). For example, Whalen & Fried (1973) found that high mobility students with high IQ scores achieved higher in school than low mobility student with high IQ scores. However, many of the effects of mobility tend to be negative. As Rumberger and Larson (1998) suggest, "student mobility is generally detrimental both to students and to the schools they attend" (p.1).

Student mobility tends to adversely affect student achievement, behaviour and social interactions, and student health and development. Scores on achievement tests may be lower in more mobile students (Mantzicopoulos and Knutson, 2000; Parades, 1993, in Wright, 1999). Below grade-level reading scores (Rumberger & Larson, 1998) and lower literacy and numeracy performance (DEST and Def, 2002) have been associated with mobility. Academic competence in general is compromised by school moves (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; DEST and Def, 2002; Family Housing Fund, 2002; Fisher et al, 2002; Ingersoll, Scamman and Eckerling, 1988; Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000). Mobile students are faced with learning new procedures in each new school (Fisher et al, 2002). As Mantzicopoulos and Knutson (2000) suggest, "Students who transfer from school to school may struggle with instructional practices that proceed at a different pace with each new teacher" (p. 310). Mobility has been linked to high school completion (Martin, 2002; Skandera and Sousa, 2002), with chances of completing high school diminishing as school moves increase (DEST and Def, 2002; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). However, Wright (1999) cautions that lower achievement should not be blamed solely on mobility. "Student mobility is subordinate in its effects on achievement to the risk factors for ethnic minority status and low family income" (p. 403).

Behaviour and social interactions seem to be affected by mobility (DEST and Def, 2002; Fields, 1997; Fisher et al, 2002; Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000). Nelson, Simoni and Adelman (1996, in Wright, 1999) found that more mobile students rated lower initially in behaviour and school adjustment than less mobile students. In a study of highly mobile ten to fifteen year olds in Queensland, Fields (1995) found that 70% of the sample had experienced significant social and school adjustment problems. Peer acceptance ratings of these students was decidedly lower than their non-mobile peers. Problems with social adjustment could be due to having to adjust to new school environments, peers and social expectations (Fisher et al, 2002; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Astone and McLanahan (1994) suggest that mobile families have less information about the school and this can undermine students' relationships with teachers and peers. Children may feel socially isolated and consequently take up with other marginal students who may be involved in anti-social behaviour.

Finally, health and development may be affected by mobility. A United States General Accounting Office study (1994, in Rumberger & Larson, 1998) found that nutrition and

health problems were associated with school moves. Development may also be adversely affected by mobility (Matzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Mobility is reported to also have an effect on students' self-perception, with highly mobile students reporting themselves to be more insecure, inconsistent, complaining, critical, and with fewer friends than their less mobile peers (Audette et al, 1993).

Interestingly, Rahmani (1981, in Fields, 1995) found no significant negative effects on measures of academic and social achievement for the children of defence force families. This discrepancy in the findings of mainstream children compared with defence force children could be due to the highly structured and supported relocations of defence force families (Duffy, 1987, in Fields, 1995).

While negative effects of mobility are widely reported in the literature, Ingersoll et al (1988) caution that using mobility as a blanket excuse for negative functioning is a misnomer. "Mobility effects may be solely a function of contamination of pre-existing differences, including socio-economic status, or they may be reflective of other effects related to disruption of smooth psychosocial development" (p.6). Fields (1997) notes that moves prompted by peer problems, such as bullying, behavioural problems and poor achievement are less likely to be successful as these difficulties tend to reappear in the new school environment.

Mobility is reported to not only affect students and their families, but to impact upon schools and system functioning. Effects include disruption to teaching, difficulty with student records and lower overall school achievement.

Students entering and leaving the class throughout the year may result in disruptions to teaching, and possibly less effective teaching Fisher et al, 2002; Martin, 2002; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Untimely and often inaccurate placement and assessment of mobile students (Fisher et al, 2002) may result in teachers spending more time orienting these students (Martin, 2002) and reviewing material previously covered (Fisher et al, 2002). As Fisher et al (2002) note, "As new students enrol, teachers often must resort to review strategies in lieu of more creative and innovative instructional approaches" (p. 318). This effects the quality of teaching not only to mobile students, but to their less mobile counterparts. Fisher et al (2002) suggest that effects of mobility may lead to antecedents, giving the example that mobility's negative effects may lead to school staff becoming less caring. This, in turn, could lead to further mobility.

Records of attendance, enrolment, assessment and placement become more difficult to maintain, both within the classroom and by school administration (Fisher et al, 2002). This can potentially hamper administrators' efforts to build a stable sense of stability and community within the school (Fisher et al, 2002; Martin, 2002). Finally, schools with higher rates of mobility tend to achieve lower on standardised tests. Audette et al (1993) reported that schools with highly mobile populations scored lower on achievement tests than more stable schools.

Intervention to address negative effects of mobility

A number of strategies have emerged to address perceived negative effects of mobility. These include modifications to curriculum and record-keeping, changes to school policy and practices, and community involvement with mobile families.

Universal curricula may be a way to minimise the impact of mobility to individual students (Fisher et al, 2002; Williams, 1996, in Wright, 1999). However, considering that students move between states as well as between schools, this would mean a national curriculum, involving participation from each state and territory. Computerised record exchange systems

and other policies and procedures to keep track of student progress and reporting to parents and future schools would allow faster transfer of student information to concerned stakeholders (DEST and Def, 2002; Fields, 1997; Fisher et al, 2002). A strategic plan that is communicated to all stakeholders and reviewed regularly may also help address the negative effects of mobility (Fields, 1997).

School policies and practices need to change to address student mobility (Fields, 1997; Fisher et al, 2002; Matzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). One way is through increasing students' sense of membership in the school and engagement with the curriculum (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). "Schools should assume a key role in helping students construct and maintain a sense of stability and predictability within the school setting" (Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000, p. 310). Schools need to create a nurturing and personalised climate with teachers who are emotionally available to their students as a way to improve student affiliation and engagement (Fields, 1997; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Teachers should establish positive relationships with parents to maintain high expectations of students (Fisher et al, 2002). They need to be trained in flexible instructional strategies, multiple methods of assessment and the challenges of facing mobile families (Fisher et al, 2002).

Curricular services that support this include academic support such as tutoring and before-and-after school programs and personal development studies within the school (Fisher et al, 2002). Orientation and welcome sessions for new students would also help to engage mobile students (Ingersoll et al, 1988). Buddy systems, where existing students help to orient new students into the school, may also help to address the effects of mobility (Fisher et al, 2002). While these strategies seem to hold great potential in addressing the negative effects of mobility, Fisher et al (2002) note that "rarely are antecedents a focus of school-level interventions" (p.319).

Extra-curricular activities that support families and forge stronger bonds between the school with families are considered by Fisher et al (2002) to be the best strategy for preventing high mobility. These include: health services, breakfast and lunch programs, clothing pools, counselling, adult and parent education classes, family camps and multi-age programs. These strategies would strengthen family bonds to help families work efficiently in spite of mobility. Keeping parents strong contributes to more effective partnerships between parents and schools in the academic and social development of their children (Fisher et al, 2002). Parents need more information about the impact on children of changing schools (Martin, 2002).

The community can also help address the negative effects of mobility. Within the education, communication between schools and school districts can be strengthened (Martin, 2002). The Family Housing Fund (2002) notes that the whole community has a stake in school attendance and schools must therefore involve the whole community in helping mobile students and their families. Better housing, efficient delivery of social services can be achieved through focused interventions and integrated service by multiple agencies (Family Housing Fund, 2002).

While a number of practices have been set in place to address the needs of mobile students and their families, the focus has mainly been towards the effects of mobility rather than its antecedents (Fisher et al, 2002). Fisher et al (2002) also note that from their investigations, no programs were identified that directly address school-related causes of mobility. For example, while school personnel recognised the importance of building caring, trusting relationships with families, no systemic efforts were identified to create such relationships in actual practice (Fisher et al, 2002).

Methodology

This research investigated the reasons for and effects of mobility in Cairns, a regional city in northeast Queensland in Australia. Between 1997 and 2000, 4 out of every 10 adults in Queensland had moved at least once (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2000). Of these, 72% had relocated within 20 kilometres and 49% within five kilometres of their previous home. Employment opportunities and changes in housing were the main reasons cited for the moves. Seventy percent of the moves were made by unemployed persons. Thirty eight percent of couples with children and 43% of single parents with children moved during this period. Regional areas such as Cairns recorded slightly higher moves (42%) than urban areas (40%). Between 69% and 80% of people residing in units and townhouses had moved house during this time, as opposed to 36% of people living in separate houses (ABS, 2000).

This research used Fisher et al's (2002) "Cycle of Mobility" as a framework. This framework focuses on the antecedents of mobility, or sources contributing to movement in and out of schools/districts (school and family circumstances), mobility's effects on school processes, and its consequences for students and families, and intervention strategies to address negative effects of mobility. The research questions were:

- What factors in families appear to give rise to mobility?
- What are the perceived effects of mobility to students?
- What are the perceived effects of mobility to the school processes?
- What intervention strategies are currently in place to address any perceived negative effects of mobility? How successful are these? Could more be done to address the negative effects of mobility?

Similar to Wright (1999), this study focuses on primary school students. This is because, as Parades (1993, in Wright, 1999) suggests, mobility has a more pronounced effect at earlier grade levels. Through Education Queensland (2002), the researchers identified five focal primary schools with high mobility rates within the Cairns local area. Due to time restrictions on this research, we felt that taking our sample from five schools would be manageable while still providing us with rich description of factors influencing mobility. We also felt that for this study, we would focus on state schools, where mobility is considerably higher than in private schools. Future studies might include a larger sample of schools, including a variety of private, as well as public schools.

Of the five schools, only Niranda State School (pseudonym) ranked in the level of high mobility in statewide data; three others ranked in the average to high levels of mobility and one ranked in the average level of mobility for the state although, according to school personnel, it has high levels of mobility within a portion of the school population (Education Queensland, 2002).

Niranda State School (pseudonym) has a school population of 90 students. It is situated on the main road to the north of Cairns. The area surrounding the school has changed dramatically in the past decade or so. Where once the school was surrounded by houses, there are now very few houses, but an abundance of units. This, of course has changed the make-up of the community. Quite a number of the students do not come from the immediate area but in fact are dropped off and picked up by passing parents. The number of students is declining each year. Education Queensland's Behaviour Support Services Unit is located in this school.

Bridgewater State School (pseudonym) is in a low-socio economic, multicultural area. This school is also experiencing a downward trend in student population. Again, because of the changes in Cairns, the school is changing. Quite a number of 'English as a Second Language' families have moved into the school community. The mix of the school population has changed dramatically over the last decade. A large Department of Housing estate is part of the catchment area for the school. The school population is approx 483. This school also has a designated [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) unit attached.

Primbee State School (pseudonym). This is the inner city school in the Cairns area, which like the two schools above, has seen massive changes with the conversion of the area surrounding the school to units and flats rather than homes. The school population of approximately 282 students is multi-cultural with a high number of indigenous students. This school has a Special Needs Development Unit attached.

Wellington State School (pseudonym) has one of the highest populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in an urban primary school setting in Australia. The school student population is presently 441. A Hearing unit is part of the school. A nearby suburb, which feeds the school, is a large Department of Housing area has recently undergone urban renewal. There is quite a high level of movement of students between the above 3 schools, particularly by Indigenous students.

Egmont State School (pseudonym) was chosen as a difference to the above schools. It is located in a higher socio-economic suburb and has students with a wider range of family backgrounds. This school was once the 'elite' primary school of Cairns, although it too has faced many changes in recent years. Because of the popularity of this school, the Education Department has had to place restrictions on enrolments to this school. Students living in the immediate surrounds or family members of current students are now the only students who can be enrolled. The current number of students is 798.

Once administrators in the five schools agreed to participate in the research, they then were asked to identify up to ten families of current students with high mobility levels. Permission was sought from families to participate in research interviews. Mantzicopoulos and Knutson (2000) focused their research on parental reports of the effects of mobility on the family and the children, however we felt that adding school personnel's perceptions would enrich our findings. We invited one administrator and one teacher from each school to participate in the research, and also invited a school social worker and an in-school program coordinator to a total of twelve participants from schools.

Of the 5 to 10 families contacted in each school (by letter, telephone, and in some cases through visits to the home), the only parents who consented to be interviewed were from Egmont State School, the school with least amount of mobility in the study. Dave, a Year 7 teacher at Niranda State School, encouraged the researchers to "door knock" as parents probably wouldn't respond to our letters of request. In all but Egmont School, the majority of families had moved again by the time the researcher went to visit the homes. Dave explained:

A lot of instances have been where mothers are dodging the father, usually trying to limit, or actually in a lot of cases that we have had here, stop access, and therefore they don't want anyone to know where they are. They can go to the lengths of changing their names, and therefore that is why they constantly move...They usually get into an employment stream which will support that movement."

Parents were interviewed in their homes, using open-ended questions about antecedents to mobility and perceived effects to the student, including school performance, peer relationships, and behaviour. They were also asked about any intervention strategies that may have been implemented to address the effects of mobility to the child and family. Interviews were audiotaped where possible (some participants would not agree to this) and notes were taken by the researchers as the interviews proceeded. Interviews were transcribed and coded, looking for emergent themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Emergent codes were then applied to the entire data set and displays formatted to group information for further analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

School personnel were similarly interviewed, in the school setting, using a series of open-ended questions about antecedents to mobility, perceived effects of mobility to students and school processes, and intervention strategies in place to address negative effects. Again, interviews were transcribed and coded.

Findings

Reasons for Mobility

Similar to the literature, participants named both family and school issues as antecedents to mobility. Most participants cited housing changes, where families change residences within the same area or move to another geographical location, as a prime reason for students changing schools. This includes moves interstate, overseas and to Indigenous communities outside of Cairns. Employment of parents was another strong reason given for mobility in the Cairns area, where work can be seasonal and dependent on tourism.

A number of participants also named family breakdown as a reason for mobility. Family breakdown can include separation, divorce and domestic violence. Lisa (pseudonym), a Year 4/5 teacher at Wellington School, said:

Sometimes there might be a family thing, where [the children] move from parent to parent, so we get children sort of wafting in with a parent and when we contact their old school, they were with a different parent. They don't seem to be long-staying those children. They seem to be really mobile.

At times, family breakdown can become more serious, with one parent hiding from the other parent, possibly fearing the safety of themselves and their children. Dave reported:

A lot of instances have been where mothers are dodging the father, usually trying to limit, or actually in a lot of cases that we have had here, stop access, and therefore they don't want anyone to know where they are. They can go to great lengths of changing their names, and therefore that is why they constantly move... They usually get into an employment stream which will support that movement.

Most participants also cited school-based reasons for mobility, primarily the behaviour of the child. Lisa noted that some children "move school because they are getting into trouble at one school and they think they can go to another school and that the trouble won't follow them. But the truth is that they haven't made any changes themselves." Anecdotes from school personnel describe these situations as follows:

The child that is leaving my class is leaving because he is down here currently from Thursday Island [in the Torres Strait] and living with his aunty, and his behaviour is so poor that she can not control him and she is sending him back to live with his mother on Thursday Island (Ralph, Year 6 Teacher, Egmont School).

I had a boy who was getting into sniffing glue and he was getting into a lot of trouble here at school, so he was just taken from here and taken over to Egmont School. But I noticed that he is now back in Wellington School, so I don't know what happened at Egmont, but he was just moved simply because he was getting into trouble. (Lisa)

At the moment, I've got a girl who has been getting into trouble and I think the family might have moved house to Fairfield (pseudonym) – they said they were going to Fairfield and she said "no", she was going to stay here at Wellington. She has been getting into a little bit of trouble. The parents have said, "Oh no, we're going to take her to Fairfield." (Lisa)

Other school-based reasons for mobility include behaviour of parents and teachers. Sandra (pseudonym), an in-school program coordinator, noted that sometimes parents don't fit into the school. At times, added Kate (pseudonym), a Year 3 teacher at Beaumont School, mobility may be the results of teachers picking on students. Another school-based reason for mobility reported was parents not liking the child's teacher.

While not prominent in the literature about mobility, this research found a number of cultural issues for mobility in the Cairns area, particularly within the Indigenous population. These included families going back to the Torres Strait Islands to visit relatives, attend funerals, or join in cultural celebrations. Health of relatives was also named as a reason for families moving. Lisa said, "Children go up to the islands to see their families and they are taken up there and they can be gone for two or three months at a time." Leonard (pseudonym), Deputy Principal of Bridgewater School, added that some families are on "T.I. (Thursday Island) time. They don't get back until weeks after school starts."

Effects of Mobility on Students

Participants reported a number of negative effects of mobility on school achievement, social interactions and behaviour of the child. Contrary to the literature, no mention was made, either by school personnel or parents, of any effects of mobility on health and development.

All participants mentioned the negative impact of mobility on school achievement. Gaps experienced through missing chunks of schoolwork make it difficult for a mobile student to catch up with their new class. Lisa observed that there are "gaps in their skills and knowledge because they haven't had the continuous curriculum, so that when we go to teaching something, or go back over something or something comes up, the rest of the class know it and they [the mobile students] are just sitting there." If students have arrived from another area, particularly from interstate, they may be unfamiliar with the curriculum altogether. Year 6 teacher at Primbee School, Patrick (pseudonym) said, "Kids become disenfranchised – they often come in too late in the term to pick up on what is happening."

Many of the mobile students were reported to require special support programs, such as Reading Recovery to address their academic needs. Yet mobility tends to disrupt these programs, and the length of time it often takes to transfer students' records from the old school to the new one can mean the problems are not addressed for lengthy periods of time, if at all. Warren (pseudonym), Principal of Niranda School, said, "Generally, mobile students benefit from special programs and then these are disrupted. Appraisalment is an example. It takes quite a bit of time and effort to carry out an appraisalment on a student, and often you just get it carried out and they move."

Besides schoolwork suffering and students needing to catch up on missed work, participants said that there are a number of social problems associated with student mobility. A large number mentioned the difficulties associated with settling into a new school environment. "The students themselves may not be able to fit in to the community of the school," noted Dave. "It makes it very difficult for the students to build good relationships with other students, and friendships. They usually require a lot of catching up to get up to the level that we are at in the school, or within the school environment." One mother added that some days her son seemed "really down" at home and didn't want to go to school.

Friendships and relationships with other students and teachers were mentioned by both school personnel and parents as one of the difficulties experienced by mobile students. This included both the component of disrupting established friendships, which caused sadness and grief in some children, and the difficulty of making new friends in a new environment. Barbara, mother of 12 year old Mark, said that in new schools Mark has found it difficult to make

friends, describing the friendships he had established as “on again/ off again” friendships. She said that as Mark has moved into the upper primary grades, he has felt less accepted by other children. This, she added may be partly due to his interests, which are more inclined towards the arts than to sport, which is a strong feature in the schools Mark has attended.

Parents mentioned that at times their children were teased by other students. Teachers commented that often mobile students seem anxious, nervous, unsure, shy, reserved and reluctant to stay in school. At times, they don’t try to fit in because they know they will leave again soon. According to Warren these are signs of the deep impact mobility has had on the child. Sandra related this story:

There was a little boy who I remember very distinctly. He had moved around a lot. His parents were both long-term unemployed and very mobile. He came to our school after quite a number of other schools. He was very reserved when it came to making friends. We did a lot of work on fitting him into the class and assisting him with making friends. He was invited to a birthday party for another boy in the class. He was so excited. It was his first ever invitation to a birthday party and he was so looking forward to it. A week before the party, his parents moved town and he was gone. I will never forget the look of dismay on his face when he told me he was leaving.

Other social issues that were mentioned as consequences of mobility included the financial burden incurred by the move, including the actual moving costs but also the need to purchase new uniforms and supplies required by the new school. One teacher noted the problems that may occur with transport, particularly for students living beyond the school boundaries.

While both parents and teachers reported behaviour problems in the form of not wanting to come to school, teachers reported that behaviour problems from previous schools were not necessarily addressed by the new school. This was partly due to the length of time it currently takes for information from one school to reach another, and also because some parents were reluctant to inform the new school of their children’s behaviour problems, preferring to present the child as problem-free as a way of giving the child a fresh start. “This means we often have to re-invent the wheel with a new student,” noted Warren.

School personnel and parents also mentioned positive effects of student moves. They included a disruption to undesirable friendships and a creation of new friendships. This can also impact on the child’s behaviour. Warren said, “Sometimes when a child moves, behaviour improves – where the friendships which were influencing the behaviour are no longer there to detract from learning.”

Beyond new friendships, the process of moving schools was reported to provide the child with new experiences and help to build resilience and independence in some children. As school principal, Kylie (pseudonym), Deputy Principal of Wellington School, noted, “An upsetting routine to one child can be a challenge to another child – it depends on children’s resilience.” The experiences children bring with them may also assist them to excel in some school subjects. Dave said, “Some students have a wealth of experience and knowledge coming from different places, so they excel at subjects like science, history and SOSE.”

For the most part, participants reported negative effects of student mobility. However, when asked to describe strategies currently in place to address these effects, most participants described school policy and practices in place to address these effects, rather than changes to curricula, record-keeping or community involvement. Where changes to curricula were mentioned, they were programs such as Reading Recovery (reading program), Soundwaves (language program), You Can Do It (socialisation program), a Resilience program and Computer programs in various subject areas, which are programs used both in the classroom

and in one-to-one situations to address learning and socialising difficulties of all students, not particularly mobile students. No mention was made of universal curricula or modifications to existing curricula, and no changes to school record-keeping or transferring of student information were noted.

Effects of Mobility on School Processes

In keeping with the literature, participants in this research cited a number of negative effects of mobility on the school. However, they also named positive effects. For example, new students were reported to enhance the classroom. “Kids get used to new faces and adapt pretty well,” said Patrick. Participants said that by helping new students, existing students develop skills of interacting, acceptance, peer teaching and mentoring. “The other kids often cope very well,” said Kate. “They are so used to kids coming and going.” Mobility was also reported to help students learn about new cultures, and develop new friendships and relationships. Patrick added that mobility can give new or existing students the opportunity to have their capabilities seen in a new light.

Negative effects of mobility on school processes were reported in the areas of teaching, record-keeping, school achievement and finances. Participants said that mobile students were disruptive to class programs, often resulting in teacher frustration and cynicism. Kate gave the example of children needing to go into the Reading Recovery program. “The teacher puts a lot of time and effort into it and gets the child onto the program, working well, and then the child disappears. Then comes back a few months later.” She added, “Teachers are frustrated and disappointed when kids move again – they are just making headway and the kid moves.” Warren echoed this thought, noting, “No teacher really wants to lose a child.

Alongside disruptions to teaching and teacher frustration, many participants said that mobile students can create more work for teachers, as well as taking the teacher’s time away from other students. Teachers said:

One of the... issues with student mobility is the constant reprogramming we have to do, the individual programming. Which means that your other duties are being cut down and the workload increases and you have more teacher stress. (Dave)

When a child comes into a class, they are probably not up to speed because we work really hard and the teacher time goes off the positive things such as spending more time with those kids that need extension and you end up back down trying to catch up these children who have come in. so it does take away from your better students, there is no doubt about that. (Lisa)

It is difficult to find time to figure out where the child is, academically and socially. This all takes time and often by the time you are sorting it out, they move again. (Patrick)

Other issues that were reported as negative effects of mobility were the effects on other students in the class. These included upsetting the class balance of girls and boys, and the class numbers so that new classes may need to be formed. It also included the need for other students to redefine friendship groups and change group dynamics. Newcomers were reported to sometimes disrupt existing class dynamics, and students who leave to cause remaining students to grieve for them. Kate expressed her frustration and annoyance that other ‘more stable’ children in the school missed out on these programs because of number restrictions and the “valued places” being taken by mobile students, only to have them move yet again. Lisa said:

On the other students it is disruptive having new children coming into the class on a fairly regular basis, and they miss their friends who go out of class, too. We've had children that have gone out, come back, gone out, and the children are always, "Well, there is a friendship gone." And I think they do grieve a little bit for their friends.

A few participants mentioned the difficulties with class and school record keeping that are brought about by mobility. Kylie noted:

Records are sent on to the next school, but the child may not always go where they said they were going. If a child has special needs, the Guidance Officer requests files from the previous school, but this may take some time in coming. Sometimes the files never come, for a range of reasons. This is usually when a child moves quite a lot.

Others noted that it could prove difficult to contact the parents of mobile students, as they may not have a phone nor contact details.

Participants said that school achievement can be adversely effected by mobility. Ralph gave this example:

In our classroom, we practice number facts really regularly and at the end of last year (I had taken the class up) my class had an average of 99.1, which is really, truly exceptional. This year when different children cam into the class, the average dropped to something like 87%, just by adding four new children to the class. So obviously one of the problems is the consistency, or the different emphasis that different teachers place on things.

Finally, mobility was said to strain school budgets. A participant said that at times the child moves before the parents have finished paying their school levy. It was reported that school resources are taxed by student mobility. "It drains our resources, left right and centre," said Dave. "Especially if we have to purchase other stuff, like resources and textbooks. It pulls up our teacher aide time as well."

Current Strategies to Address Perceived Negative Effects of Mobility, and their success

For the most part, participants reported negative effects of student mobility, both to the student and to the school. However, when asked to describe strategies currently in place to address these effects, most participants described school policy and practices in place to address these effects, rather than changes to curricula, record-keeping or community involvement. Where changes to curricula were mentioned, they were programs such as Reading Recovery (reading program), Soundwaves (language program), You Can Do It (socialisation program), a Resilience program and Computer programs in various subject areas, which are programs used both in the classroom and in one-to-one situations to address learning and socialising difficulties of all students, not particularly mobile students. No mention was made of universal curricula or modifications to existing curricula, and no changes to school record-keeping or transferring of student information were noted.

A number of strategies described school practices that existed to address the negative effects of mobility. These included teachers and support staff who welcomed new families and made extra efforts to get to know them through new parent nights, interviews, extra-curricular activities, community-building activities and familiarising families with the school and the community. Listening to and accepting families' feedback about changes that could be made within the school context, and having uniforms and books readily available for new children were also mentioned as practices currently in place to address issues of mobility. Other strategies included buddy systems and continued support of the child. Lisa noted:

We try to make [the new child] feel welcome and that they are part of the group. We try to do some group inclusive activities so we get them into a group in the classroom and we try to encourage them to have their say and maybe try to get them to be “Student of the Week” or something, just to make them settle in and realise it is a good place to be.

Several participants mentioned that classroom teachers work hard to help children to fit into the school. “We do our best to fit the kids in and give them the best access to curriculum, said Patrick. A small number of teachers also mentioned efforts that are made to increase parents’ awareness of the importance of education and to discourage the move. Sandra said, “Most schools do not like students to move to another school in the area, and try to work issues through for the stability of the child.” Lisa added:

When parents come in and say that they have been moved to another house and they were thinking about moving their children, we do try to discourage [this] with an interview, and talk through some of the issues. I think a lot of the teachers spend time with the children trying to give them a positive view of the school, and we watch out for them.

Where there is no chance of keeping the child in the school, a small number of participants said that staff prepare the child for the move. Ingrid (pseudonym), a school social worker, promoted the idea of preparation, including teaching the child how to keep in contact with the old school and build positive relationships with the new. Lisa said:

Sometimes the children you can really work with and get them going and send them off to the next school with at least lots of work in their books that they’ve really made a start on their learning. And we can moderate where they are up to in their work so we can send on information to another school.

Brief mentions were made to other policy and practice changes, including attendance officers who followed up on mobile or absentee children and their families, extra programming time for teachers to assess the levels of new students and trying to get extra teacher aid time.

Very little mention was made of community involvement as a strategy to address the negative effects of mobility, other than a mention of other agencies attempting to address attendance issues and involving the whole community in heritage activities within the school.

While a number of participants rated current strategies as successful, they often mentioned that success was dependent on a number of variables, including parents’ and child’s cooperation and reasons for the move. Dave said:

[Success] varies from student to student. It tends to be very successful for some students and not so successful for other students, especially students who move around a lot who don’t really want to make friendships, but prefer to be on their own. And trying to improve them in group activities tends to disrupt the group of students.

Kylie felt that success lie in the communication channels with families. She said that a number of the families that had moved out of the area still stay in contact with the school. Lisa described a successful transition that she had facilitated:

One that I had a success with is a little boy who came to me from a school on the Tablelands where they had been getting into a lot of trouble, mainly I think through his older brother. And when he came here he told me that they came here for a new start. So I explained to him that schools are all the same – buildings, teachers, children, lessons, principals, deputy principals, and that the only thing that can change is himself. And we went

through a whole lot of Choice Theory things on how he can make better choices and he has settled in really well.

Suggestions of Further Strategies to Address the Negative Effects of Mobility

A number of strategies, mentioned in the literature and not actually in place in the schools surveyed, were suggested by participants as further ways to deal with the negative effects of mobility. The most commonly suggested strategies involved creating better communication with parents and between schools through further changes to policy and practice. At times, it was noted, parents do not share enough information about the child with the new school. Ken (pseudonym), Deputy Principal of Egmont School, said:

Sometimes parents don't give the full story on enrolment – if the child has learning support issues, disabilities or behavioural problems. They want to keep it a secret so the kids can be given a fresh start, but then the issues rise fairly quickly. Sometimes these children need to be placed in a special needs class for their own benefit.

With some parents not sharing information, the problem of obtaining information about the child from the previous school is compounded. A number of participants suggested that more could be done to make sure information about the child, including special needs, and work folios were sent promptly to the next school. Ralph put forward the idea of a central data collection agency to address this problem.

It probably wouldn't be a bad idea that there was some central data collection agency which simply, rather than the parents or the guardians of the child be expected to bring on that child's transcript forms and report cards and stuff like that...some sort of central agency that would hold the records of the children for a particular period of time, especially while they are in the state system.

Some participants suggested the need for better partnerships with parents, including sharing information about the effects of mobility and the importance of education, and offering parenting programs that help to change the home lives of mobile students. Some participants said that this was not an easy task. Kylie suggested that schools "give parents more information on the effects of moving on the kids – although we never see much of the parents of mobile students."

Suggestions were made to employ home/school liaison officers, possibly similar to the Community Participation Officers currently employed. Currently, there are two officers in the Cairns and Cape District office and their job is to support home/school relationships in all the schools in the district. Beyond this, one participant suggested that the Department of Education should intervene to stop people from moving schools. Lisa said:

I really think that the department needs to maybe look at ways and means of stopping people changing schools willy-nilly within a school district for no good purpose except that "I'm getting into trouble here; I'll go over somewhere else.

Warren suggested that schools develop partnerships with similar sized schools for purposes of curriculum development, professional development, assessment and reporting. Other suggestions for changes to policy and practice included offering the new student a mentor from the existing student body and, through staff development, making staff aware of the existing mobility rate and its effects on students, families and the school.

A few suggestions of further strategies in the area of curriculum were made. It was suggested that Australia adopt a national curriculum where standards and assessment are universal

across states and territories. This curriculum needs to have a degree of flexibility and to be reviewed triennially to improve its ability to cater to the needs of mobile students.

In the area of community involvement, a number of participants suggested that schools work more closely with external and government agencies to address the effects of mobility. Peter (pseudonym), Principal of Primbee school, suggested that schools:

Continue to work in an interagency mode as a team. Schools are locations that families link to and identify with – it is a good situation for a hub of services and a good situation for identification of issues...Schools are a great place to locate government agencies and further nourish community and community belongings.

Conclusion

As Sandra so aptly said, “Not many families [in the Cairns area] move for conventional reasons, such as transfers with parents jobs.” Although some families in this area do relocate to seek employment or changes to housing, three other reasons for mobility feature strongly in this research. The first is family breakdown, where one parent is seeking to deny access to, and in some cases to hide from the other parent. In an area that relies heavily on tourism, Cairns is reported to attract people seeking seasonal or temporary employment, possibly for the sake of remaining mobile. The second reason for mobility that featured strongly in this research is children’s behaviour, where parents stay at the same residence but change their children to another school, and then possibly back to the original school, because they have been getting into trouble and may need a fresh start. Finally, a number of cultural reasons for mobility were reported, primarily in the Torres Strait Islander community. These included going back to the Torres Strait Islands for funerals, celebrations or to visit relatives, and could take children out of school altogether for long periods of time.

The interviews conducted in Cairns schools support the notion that, while there are some positive effects of mobility on the student, there are a great many negative effects that impede upon learning and socialisation. Mobile students are faced with disruptions to and gaps in their studies, difficulties in adjusting to new situations, and extra burdens such as transport and financing new uniforms and supplies. With the high incidence of mobility in many schools in the Cairns area, these problems should be clearly visible to teachers, parents and administrators, yet many school personnel are still unaware of the extent of the problem.

The effects of mobility on the schools as a whole were also highlighted. Positive effects included helping existing students to learn about new cultures and interaction with others and giving new students a chance to have their capabilities seen in a new light. But similar to effects on the student, most effects on school processes reported were negative. These include the need for classroom and staff changes, the impediment on programs such as New Basics and Rich Tasks, and the constant need to adapt teaching programs and practises to suit the newcomers.

Participants reported a few strategies that are currently implemented in Cairns schools to address the negative effects of mobility, but for the large part these strategies seem to rely on the good nature and welcoming attitude of the teacher, and the extra support for special needs within the school. Strategies include: parent nights for new parents, morning teas for new students, and teachers making an effort to help the new student fit into the class situation. Curriculum strategies for mobile students are mainly supplementary programs, such as Reading Recovery, that are offered to all students with special needs. Little is being done to involve the larger community in addressing the needs of mobile students and their families. According to participants, current strategies work for some students but not for others. This implies that it is a “hit or miss” situation whether mobile students will actually meet their

learning and socialisation outcomes during their school lives, and ultimately whether they will continue to high school completion.

A number of strategies to better address the negative effects of mobility were suggested, including a central data collection agency to track the students and to pass on information from one school to the next and better partnerships between families, the school and the larger community, including making all stakeholders more aware of the reasons for mobility, the statistics on mobility and consequence of mobility to the student, the family and the school. The next step is to implement these strategies, in the school, in the area and nationally.

The whole community, including other departments and agencies must also implement strategies to arrest the constant movements of families with school-aged children, it was suggested.

As Fisher et al (2002) observed, people recognise the importance of addressing the issues of mobility, but have yet to implement strategies to do so. As one parent noted, "Lots of kids have issues [due to mobility]. There needs to be more help for the kids and more family support."

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