STUDENT MOBILITY: ISSUES AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of students change schools every year. Some, including the children of itinerant farm workers, change residences, schools and education systems on a regular basis. Whilst teachers and parents tend to regard student mobility as having a negative effect on students' literacy achievements, research in the field of educational itinerancy has been surprisingly limited and offers inconclusive results. Additionally, guidelines that have been designed to assist schools manage the enrolment of mobile students have focused on the organisational practices of schooling, including year level placement and curricular and certification issues. This means that limited knowledge has been available about mobility and its relationship to literacy learning, and little pedagogical advice has been on offer for literacy teachers.

This paper seeks to redress these issues. It draws on data from a study that investigated mobility-related issues in a North Queensland primary school, where an annual influx of itinerant farm workers' children during the winter harvesting season boosted the school's population by approximately ten per cent. Using the voices of teachers and students, the paper considers the impact of mobility on school processes, explores aspects of students' engagement with school literacy learning, and investigates how schools might facilitate literacy learning for mobile students.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of students in Australian schools change schools each year. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001; 2003a; 2003b) demonstrate that mobility is a feature of contemporary Australian society and that approximately 12 or 13% of those who move interstate each year are children between the ages of 5 and 14 years. This figure, however, would appear to understate the extent of student mobility, because it includes neither students over 14 years of age nor students who move intrastate. Recognition

that so many Australian school students are or have been mobile raises questions about the relationship between changing schools and educational achievement, including literacy achievement, and about how schools might address issues of 'educational mobility'. Such questions are particularly important in light of findings that school achievement in literacy is generally predictive of later successes in life (Lamb, 1997).

Until recently, research on mobility in Australian schools has been quite limited. In the 1980s and 1990s, some research attempted to determine the educational ramifications of mobility by comparing academic achievements of mobile and residentially-stable students. In general, these studies linked residential stability to educational success; linked mobility to poorer academic achievement (e.g. Birch & Lally, 1994; Fields, 1995, 1997) and a detrimental effect on children's progression from one year level to the next (Rahmani, 1985); and identified mobility as impacting negatively on schools and teachers by creating unpredictable enrolments, increasing teachers' workloads and placing strain on school resources (Birch & Lally, 1994; Mills, 1986; Rahmani, 1985). In many of these studies, mobility has been conceptualised as problematic.

Recently, however, there has been a shift in the focus of research on educational mobility, with a number of Australian studies investigating the social and cultural practices of particular groups of families who move from one location to another. For example, Danaher and his colleagues (Danaher, 1994, 1995; Danaher & Danaher, 1999; Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2004) have conducted extensive research with show and circus children, and I have been investigating literacy learning in relation to the children of seasonal itinerant farm workers (e.g. Henderson, 2001, 2004, 2005b, 2005c). Additionally, recent Australian research has considered relationships between interrupted schooling, poverty and literacy learning (Comber, 2003; Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon, & Pitt, 2001) and the transience of Indigenous families in South Australia (Department of Education, Training & Employment, South Australia, 1998; Edwards, 2003). In comparison to the earlier studies of mobility identified in the previous paragraph, these studies have started to consider how schooling might need to change in order to meet the educational needs of mobile students.

In the past, advice about mobility that has been on offer to schools has tended to focus on organisational practices (e.g. see Curriculum Corporation, 1998; Department of Education, Queensland, 2001). Issues such as the placement of students in grade levels have been important because each Australian state has been responsible for its own education system. Different starting ages for school and different curricular requirements across the states have made transitions between one system and another problematic. However, there appears to be growing interest in mobility as an important educational issue, with its appearance on federal and state government agendas. This has been evidenced by the completion of a scoping study into student mobility (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, & Department of Defence, 2002), the provision of federal funding for additional research (Nelson & Vale, 2002), and the endorsement of nationally consistent

curriculum across the four curriculum areas of English, mathematics, science, and civics and citizenship (Bligh, 2003; Holt, 2003). The proposed convergence of curriculum has been promoted as directly impacting on mobile families (Holt, 2003), because it

> will give Australian parents who move between States greater confidence that what is being taught at their children's new school is similar to what they learnt at their old one. (Bligh, 2003, July 9).

In this context of growing interest in educational mobility, the first part of this paper aims to enhance knowledge about mobility by presenting a small amount of data from recent research into the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children in a North Queensland school. The paper will present data from the perspectives of teachers, itinerant children and the researcher. It will then explore some of the pedagogical implications of that data and will consider how schools might begin the task of facilitating literacy learning for mobile students.

The study

The study into the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children was conducted in a North Queensland primary school during the winter harvesting seasons of consecutive years. Most of the itinerant students changed schools at approximately six-monthly intervals, as their parents moved between the winter harvesting season in North Queensland and the summer harvesting season in the southern states of New South Wales and Victoria. Although many families converged on the North Queensland town and school during the winter months of each year, their location at that particular place and time, the parents' occupations in the farming industry, and the children's enrolment at the same school were often the only things that the families seemed to have in common. The families differed in their experiences of farm work and in the lengths of time they had been itinerant. Additionally, they represented a range of ethnicities, including Turkish, Tongan, Maori, Samoan, Vietnamese and Anglo, and spoke a range of languages and dialects of English.

The study focused on six itinerant families. Data about the families were collected over two harvesting seasons, through interviews with itinerant students and teachers, classroom and school observations, and the collection of school documents, and were analysed using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach based on the work of Fairclough (1989, 2003; see also Henderson 2005a).

This paper, however, presents a small amount of data focusing particularly on the children of two of the itinerant families. The Moalas, a Tongan family who had been following the North Queensland/Victoria harvesting trail for over seven years, had three children. During the second year of data collection, Leilani and her twin brothers, Sepi and Sina, were in Year 7 and Year 5 of the Queensland education system respectively. The Russell family, who identified as Maori and had been moving from one location to another in the states of Queensland and Victoria for approximately five years, had five children. Four of the children – Kirra, Lexie, Ethan and Bree – were enrolled in Years 6, 3, 2 and 1 of the Queensland education system.

From the teachers' perspectives

Teachers at the school explained that the enrolment of up to 60 itinerant children during the winter months impacted in a severe way on the operations of the school. They reported that many classes increased to capacity size and beyond; at least one additional teacher had to be employed; teachers' workloads increased, and the ethnic diversity of the student population within the school increased. In particular, teachers expressed concern about the inadequacy of the education system to provide appropriate resources, both human and material, in preparation for the annual influx of itinerant students, and the difficulties of reactive rather than proactive staffing procedures.

When talking about itinerant students, many teachers focused on perceived problems in the children or their families. Indeed, deficit views of itinerant farm worker families were quite prevalent in teachers' explanations of students' literacy learning and in many of the stories about farm workers that circulated in the broader community outside the school (see Henderson, 2005b). Many teachers explained that there was a 'standard expectation that itinerant kids are going to be below the peer group' and that 'itinerant kids and literacy is definitely an issue'. On some occasions, teachers linked the children's generally low literacy performances (on both school measures and on statewide standardised tests) to social, behavioural, learning and developmental problems. At other times, teachers blamed the children's underachievement and behaviours on their parents, who were deemed to be working too many hours and were therefore thought to be too tired to provide adequate supervision, care, or home literacy experiences for their children. According to one teacher:

> Social problems, behavioural problems, lack of foundation problems. They start on foundations in maths and English and literacy. I find a lot of that. And then every time they come, obviously each year they get a little bit more behind … Social behaviour is very hard. I mean, some of them have been out of schools for a while. Maybe they've got no control at home because there are no parents there. I don't know. But when they come to school, they're wild, very wild.

Similarly, the principal explained that:

> Itinerant pickers also seem to bring in a lot more problems. I don't want to stereotype itinerant pickers into a low socio-economic category where social problems seem to manifest, but we do seem to have more than our fair share of social problems, social and emotional problems.

Within the school context, deficit discourses such as these appeared to be accepted as commonsense knowledges, whereby children's inappropriate behaviours, actions and underachievement in literacy learning were understood as predictable and 'natural' consequences of families' choices of an itinerant lifestyle. These taken-for-granted assumptions about the negative impact of an itinerant lifestyle on children's schooling meant that families were frequently viewed as culpable for the problems or difficulties that the children experienced at school.

There was no doubt that, because of the long hours required of farm workers during the harvesting season, farm worker parents had few opportunities to attend the school or to play active or visible roles in the daily operations of classrooms. As a result, there were limited opportunities for teachers to hear or see information that might have directly challenged the deficit discourses. Additionally, 'stories' circulating in the community surrounding the school – by word-of-mouth and through the local newspaper, where farm workers featured mainly in the court news (see Henderson, 2005b) – were readily available to teachers and appeared to provide support for negative constructions of farm workers and their children.

In the main, teachers expressed concern about the effects of itinerant students **on** the school and school processes. Despite the prevalence of these negative constructions, however, teachers did comment positively about some of the itinerant children, particularly those who returned to the school on an annual basis. These children were regarded as 'regulars' and many of them appeared to take up the school's routines with ease. The Moala children, for example, spent every winter at the school and it appeared that teachers were pleased to see them return. Positive comments included:

> She's [Leilani Moala] very keen, she's excellent in the classroom, and she works diligently. I mean, she is the essence of a model student.

> The twins [Sepi and Sina Moala] … they're the loveliest kids out.

Teachers also identified Kirra and Lexie Russell as 'fitting in' with school processes and routines and coping well with school work. Their siblings, Ethan and Bree, however, tended to be described as 'not interested' in learning and in need of either behaviour management or learning intervention. For example, teachers explained:

> Kirra has adjusted very well and is a diligent and motivated student.

> Lexie is actually working very well. I have no problems with her at all. She's excellent in just about everything she does. And Ethan is very bright as well. He's just a behavioural problem. He's just got an attitude and don't want to be at school, don't want to learn.

> [Bree is] loud, easily distracted, doesn't seem to focus on her work, always needs to be directed to what she has to do ... She really is struggling with her reading.

Nevertheless, what became evident was that none of the Moala or Russell children scored highly on school-based or statewide literacy assessments, regardless of whether or not they were regarded as diligent and motivated. This was particularly evident on the children's report cards, where the children's academic progress was often rated as 'below satisfactory' and at best 'satisfactory', even when they were rated highly in terms of their school behaviours, efforts and 'work' ethic.

From the children's perspectives

In contrast with the teachers' discussions about the impact of itinerant children on the school, the children identified issues that affected their abilities to 'fit in' to the classes to which they were assigned. According to the Moala and Russell children who had been itinerant for quite some time, their movement from school to school sometimes created difficulties in the classroom. In particular, they talked about their experiences of having to cope with new ways of doing things in classrooms, with new curricula, and with making new friends.

The Moala children and their parents raised the issue of curriculum discontinuity as a major problem for itinerant children. Leilani, Sepi and Sina Moala thought that schoolwork seemed easier in one state than in the other and that they often repeated work that they had done at their previous school. In an interview, the Moala children explained their perceptions of the differences between the educational systems of Queensland and Victoria and the impact on them as learners:

Interviewer: How do you go at school Leilani?
Leilani: At this one?
Interviewer: Mmm.
Leilani: Really good. My education is really high, but when I go down to Victoria my education is high but their work isn't as high as Queensland work.
Sepi: But when you go back to Victoria you do easy work and when you go up to Queensland it's really hard and you don't understand.
Sina: In [the North Queensland school] we do work and when we go down there in Victoria we do the same one.
Leilani: Yeah. We do the subjects here and like they just started on it. It's really hard for our education.

Although the children spoke in general terms and did not give specific examples to support their comments, they indicated what they perceived as the effects of year-level variations, different starting ages, and the different curricula that currently exist amongst the educational systems of the Australian states. Such differences have been identified in publications and research about moving schools in Australia (e.g. Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training, & Department of Defence, 2002; Curriculum Corporation, 1998).

Although the children complained about repeating aspects of the curriculum, it is probably fair to assume that they also missed out on sections of the established curriculum at both school sites. It was clear that Mr and Mrs Moala were concerned about possible implications for their children:

Mr Moala: I think they're going to miss some of their friends and not only that, I don't know about their subjects.
Mrs Moala: Education.
Mr Moala: I mean, the syllabus of Victoria and Queensland, is it the

same or different? I don't know. They're just the sorts of things that I was thinking about because I'm not sure whether Victoria is lower in the syllabus or if Queensland is higher or something like that. And I'm not sure that they going come in starting where they finished from Victoria, whether they start on the same thing here or they miss out some of, you know what I mean?

The Moala family – children and parents – were aware that moving from one state education system to another was potentially problematic. Although some teachers commented that itinerant students had 'missed' sections of the curriculum, they did not have first hand experience of curriculum from other states and were not necessarily aware of how difficult this situation was for the children.

Unlike the Moala children, the Russell children did not talk about curriculum discontinuity or the difficulties of moving from one educational system to another. Instead, they discussed the social activities of making friends and feeling comfortable in new classrooms, a focus that may have originated in their experiences of attending eight new schools in a three-year period. In particular, Kirra and Lexie indicated that they worried about making friends and about other children's perceptions of them:

> Kirra: When you get to the new school, you've got no friends.
> Lexie: And you look shy when they look at you. When I went into Ms Smith's class, I had to sit next to Jack and he went like this [*pulling a face*], staring at me and I, like, all the boys were staring at me. And the girls were.
> Kirra: Sometimes people might not like you.

The sisters explained that they did not like to admit that they were having difficulties with schoolwork, particularly when they first arrived in a new school. In talking about their experiences, both commented on the classroom practice of raising a hand to demonstrate lack of understanding. Whilst Lexie said that 'I don't like putting my hand up,' Kirra explained that she sometimes pretended that she was able to do the work even though she was experiencing difficulties: 'Sometimes I need to put my hand up, but I just work.'

It seemed that, in situations like these, children from both families masked – unwittingly in some cases and deliberately in others – the difficulties that they claimed they were experiencing in literacy learning. These insights seemed to offer a way of making sense of the teachers' views that some itinerant children were able to 'fit in' so well to classroom processes and routines and yet were not achieving results that reflected their efforts.

From the researcher's perspective

My classroom observations of the Moala children suggested that they had efficient strategies for coping in 'new' classrooms. When Sina was in Year 4, he talked to me about a worksheet that was pasted into one of his school notebooks and indicated how difficult he sometimes found the work he was doing in school:

Sina:	This one – it's hard, because I don't know how to do it. See, (*reading*) List the, I can't read that answer.
Interviewer:	Oh, you can't read the question.
Sina:	The big words.
Interviewer:	(*Reading*) List the features.
Sina:	(*Continuing to read*) on the TV. Undue
Interviewer:	(*Reading*) Underline.
Sina:	(*Reading*) Underline the
Interviewer:	(*Reading*) attributes. That is a hard word, isn't it? So how did you get these answers?
Sina:	My friend help me.

Although Sina had difficulty reading the instructions for the task, he had been able to complete the questions with the help of a friend or, as it appeared later in the conversation, with the help of several friends. It seemed that Sina had worked out that sitting close to friends who could help him was an effective strategy to use in the classroom. He also had definite ideas about which friends would be able to help him and which ones would not:

Interviewer:	And who's your friend [who helps you]?
Sina:	Oh, Jedd, Rick, Tony. Jack's not any good. He is a little bit, when he does these. And that's all.

Although such strategies enabled Sina to look as though he had completed the work that was set, his teacher had been misled, unintentionally, into thinking that he was coping quite well. Findings like these provide information about some of the difficulties faced by teachers in getting to know new students. The situation was probably compounded by the temporary nature of Sina's enrolment. Even if the teacher had identified the apparent mismatch between Sina's inability to do the worksheet and the appearance that all was going well, that insight may very well have been lost once Sina departed from the school.

Implications of these findings

The larger study that provided the data presented above indicated that issues relating to mobility and educational achievement are complex and that 'mobility' does not appear to be the same for all families. Whilst the brief data presented in this paper do not illustrate the extent of the heterogeneity that was evident, they do suggest some of the difficulties facing teachers, schools and itinerant families in trying to ensure students' success in literacy learning. In this section of the paper, I offer a brief discussion of the issues that were identified and include some of the considerations that may need to be made if schools are to enhance literacy learning for mobile students.

The data in this paper highlighted the prevalence of deficit discourses, difficulties with curriculum discontinuity, and the potential for teachers to 'misread' students' academic abilities. Other issues – including the school's capacity to work with a changing school population; children's capacities to cope with new circumstances, new ways of doing things and new friends; and limited opportunities for teachers to meet with itinerant parents – were also identified.

The research indicated that many teachers identified mobility as one of the significant issues that impacted on the school literacy learning of itinerant children. It appeared that low literacy results were regarded as predictable consequences of an itinerant lifestyle and of other factors in the children's circumstances, including ethnicity, language backgrounds and parental characteristics. A major problem of deficit views is the constraining effect they tend to have on teachers' pedagogical practices (see Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Comber, 1997; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Gilbert, 2000, Kamler & Comber, 2005). When deficit logic blames children and their families for literacy under-achievement, 'the problem' is located outside the school setting and beyond the control of teachers. It thus becomes difficult to see how pedagogical practices 'within the school' might make a difference to the literate capabilities of itinerant children if their literacy learning is shaped by factors 'external' to the school.

For the North Queensland school that the Moala and Russell children attended, a possible course of action is to begin with a reconceptualisation of family and educational mobility. It would appear that if mobility could be understood as part of the social practices of some families – rather than as the binary opposition of residential stability – then the pedagogical possibilities are likely to be more productive. To use the term coined by Comber and Kamler (2005), such an approach would require teachers to 'turn around' deficit views so that itinerant students and their families' lifestyles are viewed in positive ways. This means that, instead of asking how schools can 'fix up' itinerant students, school personnel would consider the productive resources that itinerant children bring to school and, through this approach, begin to address the more difficult issue of how taken-for-granted school practices might change in light of the experiences of itinerant families.

As Comber and Kamler (2004) noted in their work on 'pedagogies of reconnection', the turning-around of deficit discourses is a challenging task that requires 'serious intellectual engagement by teachers over an extended period of time' (p.295). The contestation of deficit assumptions and the construction and maintenance of a different school culture requires the establishment of strong professional learning communities, in association with strong school leadership and teachers' willingness to commit to such a long-term and intellectually demanding project (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998: Comber & Kamler, 2004; Kamler & Comber, 2005; Luke, 2003).

Whilst the identification of students' productive resources might sound easy, the data presented in this paper offered evidence that teachers sometimes 'misread' the academic abilities and progress of itinerant students. The work of Malin (1990), Thomson (2002), Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzales (1992),

and Heath and Mangiola (1991), however, offers insights that are useful here. Although not focusing specifically on literacy learning, Malin's research in an Australian urban context demonstrated how the normalisation of particular practices can result in other practices becoming invisible. Malin's study showed that:

> three Aboriginal students were visible to their teacher and peers almost exclusively when being spotlighted for "doing the wrong thing". In addition, they were largely invisible to the class when demonstrating the considerable competence which they had developed in their previous four years at home. (Malin, 1990, p.312)

Part of the process of seeing difference is to recognise that itinerant farm workers' children may very well be 'differently literate' (Carrington & Luke, 2003; Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 1997). Thomson's (2002) virtual schoolbags and Moll et al.'s (1992) 'funds of knowledge' offer metaphors for conceptualising children's resources positively and for 'seeing' strengths that may otherwise be invisible. As Heath and Mangiola (1991) suggested, teachers should not think of 'students of diverse backgrounds as bringing "differences" to school, but instead as offering classroom "expansions" of background knowledge and ways of using language' (p.17). Instead of using a 'lens' that focuses narrowly on the putative deficits of culturally and linguistically diverse students, these approaches offer ways of perceiving students' differences as cultural and linguistic resources that can be used productively for school literacy learning.

To do this, teachers will probably have to look beyond children in classrooms towards the social and cultural contexts of families and the multiple educational contexts and home contexts that they experience. A challenge for teachers is to find ways of identifying the literacy strengths of itinerant children. Rather than check-listing what it is that the students cannot do, teachers may sometimes need to be quite creative to identify the linguistic and cultural resources that children carry in their 'virtual schoolbags' (Thomson, 2002). In Comber and Kamler's (2004) research, teachers conducted a case study of an 'at-risk' child in conjunction with a classroom audit of their current literacy practice, curriculum and pedagogy. These investigations involved visits to children's homes, interviews with parents and explorations of children's out-of-school interests. The teachers then engaged in a redesign of curriculum or pedagogy in light of their new understandings. Comber and Kamler reported that the teachers 'confronted deficit discourses and made significant changes to their teaching in a remarkably short period of time' (p. 298).

Comber and Kamler's (2004) research seems to offer a way forward for teachers working with populations of mobile students. To begin with, teachers need to know much more about educational itinerancy, how experiences of being educationally itinerant differ, and what such experiences might mean for school literacy learning. Opportunities, space and time are needed for classroom teachers and other school personnel to talk with the families of itinerant children about their experiences, and to develop shared understandings about itinerancy and how it relates to children's literacy

learning. Such an approach would move away from an understanding of itinerancy as 'an unfortunate "problem" that must be "solved" or "escaped"' (Danaher & Danaher, 2000, p.28) towards discussions about access, participation and socially-just literacy curriculum and pedagogy.

Additionally, this should also help schools to consider how they might enhance relationships with itinerant families. In the case of the North Queensland school in this research, work commitments prevented itinerant farm workers from becoming involved in classroom aspects of their children's education. However, an outdoor school function that was held on a Friday evening had almost 100% attendance by parents, including those who were itinerant farm workers. The school had found a space where all parents could participate in a school activity. It would seem important that schools make use of such opportunities for families and teachers to develop shared understandings about itinerancy and its relationship to schooling.

As has been discussed, a turning around of deficit discourses should be accompanied by curricular and pedagogical considerations to facilitate literacy learning. Whilst the current federal and state government move towards nationally consistent curriculum may ease some of the difficulties experienced by students moving from one state education system to another, and even from one school to another, it seems likely that a focus only on the 'what' of literacy learning might not be enough (The New London Group, 1996). As was evident in this study, the children indicated that curriculum discontinuity was an issue. However, it also became apparent that teachers sometimes 'misread' children's abilities and that the children sometimes misrepresented themselves intentionally and unintentionally.

It would appear, then, that much more needs to be known about how teachers and schools might quickly ascertain what students already know and can do, and about what they might do to help students plug-in to the literacy learning of their 'new' classrooms. As Kalantzis and Cope (2005) emphasised, it is important that opportunities are provided for 'experiencing the known' and 'experiencing the new' (p.90). Literacy learning should incorporate ways of 'bringing in students' diverse experiences', whilst also providing opportunities for new learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005, p.90).

Final words

This paper set out to extend knowledge about literacy learning for mobile students. Whilst the paper has considered the implications for literacy learning, it also offers a challenge for teachers. The challenge is to be able to provide learning experiences for residentially-stable students who have been in the classroom since the beginning of the school year, yet to cater simultaneously for those who are newly arrived and do not necessarily have the same background knowledge about school and local-community circumstances and events. In equity terms, it would no longer seem appropriate to expect that itinerant students will simply 'fit in' to the curriculum already on offer. Curriculum and pedagogy have to be designed with all students in mind. However, it would appear that this conceptually demanding task is yet to be documented.

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