

## **Finding 'ways with words' to engage students who change schools**

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### **Abstract**

Whilst changing schools can be a daunting experience for students, it is also an important consideration for teachers who are expected to provide high quality and high equity education for all of the students they teach. This paper examines pedagogical considerations that relate to students who are newly arrived in the classroom. It investigates how teachers might identify students' 'ways with words' and engage students quickly and appropriately in classroom literacy learning. The paper draws on the findings of research into the school experiences of one group of students who change schools regularly. It considers the pedagogical challenges for teachers and concludes with some principles for framing classroom practices.

### **Introduction**

For a long time, mobile students in the Australian context, as in other parts of the world, appeared to be invisible to education systems, researchers and policy makers (Danaher, Tahir, Danaher, & Umar, 1999). However, since the 1990s, an expanding body of Australian research has highlighted the difficulties that particular groups of mobile students experience in school literacy learning (Henderson, 2005, 2008c) and in education more generally (Danaher, 1998; Henderson & Danaher, in press; Moriarty, 2009). Until fairly recently, mobility (sometimes described by other terms such as itinerancy and transience) was understood as characteristic of particular social groups, including show, fairground and circus families, military families and itinerant farm workers, and research highlighted the educational difficulties experienced by these groups. In particular, Danaher and others (e.g. Danaher & Danaher, 2009; Danaher, 1998; Danaher & Danaher, 2000) have identified some of the issues relevant to show and circus families, while Henderson (2004, 2006, 2009) has focused specifically on the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children. There is considerable evidence that these groups of mobile children often experience marginalisation and failure in school contexts (Henderson & Danaher, in press).

However, recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009) have demonstrated that increasing numbers of students are changing schools and that mobility has become a social phenomenon characteristic of Australian society. Indeed, the data suggest that 40.3 per cent of the Australian population (6.6 million people aged 5 and over) moves residence during each six year census period and this includes large numbers of school aged children. Although these data do not indicate how many school-aged children moved from one school to another, Reid (2009) noted that 80,000 children change states and schools each year and the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 30 per cent of Queensland households that moved were couples with children. The Queensland Education Department tracked the enrolment changes of one cohort of primary school students from

Year 2 in 2001 through to Year 7 in 2006 and found that 49 per cent of that cohort (N = 40,181) changed schools at least once (Bampton, Daniel, Dempster, & Simons, 2008).

Whilst such data do not explain why students change schools, it is probably fair to assume that there is considerable diversity relating to the reasons for moving and how many moves are made. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many families move for economic reasons, that a growing number of students have changed schools because of their families' involvement in the mining industry, and that some traditionally mobile groups are not as mobile as they used to be. During the 1980s and 1990s, research about students changing schools tried to quantify mobility. This resulted in a range of definitions with mobile students defined as those who had "changed schools at least once since their first enrolment" (Birch & Lally, 1994, p. 6), "attended three or more schools in the past two years" (Fields, 1995, p. 29), or "moved three or more times prior to the completion of Year 4" (Mills, 1986, p. 12). Such definitions, however, do not take account of the fact that some students can experience considerable difficulty at school as a result of a single change of school, whilst others might change schools many times without ill effects (Henderson & Danaher, in press). What is important is that students who change schools should not be marginalised or disadvantaged within school contexts.

This paper, therefore, considers student mobility or changing schools in a broad sense, encompassing all students who move schools regardless of how often. It begins by examining a range of educational arrangements that are available internationally for particular groups of mobile students. It then focuses on changing schools as an issue of interest for all teachers, and argues for a focus on pedagogies and a conceptualisation of changing schools as difference rather than deficit. Drawing on the findings of a study of itinerant farm workers' children as indicative of some of the issues that relate to students changing schools, the paper concludes with some suggestions for working with all students regardless of their residential/mobile status.

### **Catering for educationally mobile students**

It appears that classroom and school routines have generally been "stubbornly unsuccessful" for students who change schools and that it has been difficult to "develop enduringly effective solutions" for their academic success (Henderson & Danaher, in press). In looking at educational offerings for mobile students internationally, it appears that there have been many innovative ideas. However, in general, these have been envisaged as separate strategies for specific targeted groups of students or as add-on programs to mainstream schooling.

For example, in Australia, the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children is an example of a specialist school for a specific group of students (Danaher & Danaher, 2009). The school, established in 2000, comprises classrooms on semi-trailers and mobile accommodation for teachers. Referred to as a "community school on wheels" (Currie, 2000, p. 1), the school travels with show families as they move from place to place and across state and territory borders.

In the United States, the Migrant Education Program offers a range of educational options for the children of migratory farm workers. For example, there is a plethora of ESL and ELL (English as a Second Language and English Language Learners) programs (Carnuccio & O'Loughlin, 2010), as well as initiatives that foster home reading (Miller, 2010). As Gouwens (2001) highlighted, there are also programs that ensure that students can gain portable credit towards the completion of high school qualifications (e.g. Portable Assisted Study Sequence) and provide alternative paths to gaining the equivalent of a high school diploma (e.g. the High School Equivalency Program). In many cases, specific innovative programs have been introduced to assist migratory farm workers' children. The Georgia Department of Education, for example, uses a mobile computer laboratory to provide classes for migratory youth who have left school and are working as seasonal farm workers (Pestalardo & Cortez, 2010). It also offers English lessons via the loan of iPods.

Another example is the early childhood provision that is on offer for bargee children in the Netherlands. The children are able to attend berth schools during the time that their ship is in port. Additionally, instruction booklets and mentoring are available for parents, so they can teach their children while they are travelling (ECOTEC, 2008; Scholten, 2000).

From the examples cited in this section of the paper, it is apparent that there are a range of funded, innovative strategies and programs that have been implemented alongside mainstream schooling to cater for identifiable groups of mobile students. There are, however, situations where programs have been established to provide support services for schools. In England, for example, the Traveller Education Support Service provides assistance for mainstream schools by helping them to make sure students have access, to develop whole school strategies and to liaise with Traveller families, including Romani, fairground, circus and New Age Travellers (Danaher, Coombes, & Kiddle, 2007; London Borough of Havering Traveller Education Support Service, n.d.; Office for Standards in Education, 2003).

In contrast, for most schools in Australia the arrival of 'new' students is not an event for which long-term systemic planning occurs or indeed can occur. We know that some families move by choice following professional aspirations and others are forced to relocate for economic, social and political reasons (Henderson & Danaher, in press). Although some instances of changing schools involve recognised occupational groups, such as military, mining or farm worker families, it would appear that mobility has now become a widespread social phenomenon. Strategies and programs like those described above "do not address the situation faced by many mainstream teachers on a daily basis" (Henderson & Danaher, in press). It is for this reason that this paper now moves to discuss pedagogical considerations, as a way of opening up discussions about how teachers might work with an increasingly mobile population without special programs or specific funding.

### **Thinking about pedagogies for students who change schools**

A major question, of course, is whether there are specific pedagogies that will cater for students who change schools. The answer is probably no, as it would seem naïve to expect that one pedagogy or one set of pedagogies would cater for all students who relocate. As already indicated, student mobility is diverse and occurs for a range of reasons and in a variety of different ways (see Danaher, Kenny, & Remy Leder, 2009). Whether students are affected by a single change of school or whether they experience difficulties making multiple moves probably depends on the individual student and the circumstances involved. However, regardless of the circumstances, strategic pedagogical considerations are likely to assist students who change schools. It would make sense, then, to identify a set of principles that could underpin effective pedagogical approaches.

Therefore, this paper is based on the idea that teachers need 'adaptive expertise', whereby they are able to refine and reconfigure their teaching practices in order to cater for all of the students in their classes, regardless of their backgrounds or prior experiences (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005; McNaughton & Lai, 2009). As explained elsewhere (see Henderson & Danaher, in press), it "is not the pedagogies themselves that are critical" but it is most likely "the adaptation and flexible use of a range of pedagogies" that will work with students who change schools.

### **Conceptualising changing schools as difference**

In thinking about issues involved in changing schools, one consideration is the diversity of literacy practices in society and the selective tradition operating in schools. The seminal work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) highlighted how the 'ways with words' used by families at home and in their communities influenced children's trajectory at school. As Heath explained, some children are able to "bring with them to school linguistic and cultural capital accumulated through hundreds of thousands of occasions for practicing the skills and espousing the values the schools transmit" (pp. 367-368). In contrast, other children have not had opportunities to engage with the particular social practices and 'ways' of schools.

Numerous studies have corroborated Heath's (1983) findings in other contexts. Gregory and Williams (2000), for example, documented the diverse and multiple home literacy practices of a range of families in inner city London. Although they found that the literacy practices of many families did not seem to fit within "the officially recognised paradigm of preparation for school literacy" (p. 179), they identified a "wealth of literacy practices in the lives of those often considered by the education establishment to be 'deprived' of literacy" (p. 203).

As a result of such studies, many literacy researchers and educators have investigated ways of identifying children's home literacy practices and using them as resources for classroom literacy learning. Notable examples in this field include the notion of 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992), the metaphor of the 'virtual backpack' (Thomson, 2002), and the 'turn-around pedagogies' described by Comber and Kamler (2004, 2005) and their teacher researchers. Whilst

many approaches have had success in engaging diverse groups of students in school literacy learning, students who change schools have not been a specific focus. In conceptualising changing schools as difference, I argue that it is important for teachers to be able to tap into the 'ways with words' that newly arrived students bring to the classroom.

The next section of this article draws on the findings of research I conducted into the literacy learning experiences of itinerant farm workers' children (e.g. Henderson, 2008a, 2008c, 2009). The research involved detailed case studies of six families whose children enrolled in a particular primary school in North Queensland during two winter harvesting seasons. A total of 15 children, their parents and teachers were interviewed as part of the research. The information provided in the next section comes from reading across the case studies which were conducted within the school context. Whilst I recognise that students change schools for many reasons, the findings of this research highlight some of the issues which face teachers when students arrive and are 'new' to their classrooms and to the school.

### **Some issues impacting on the teaching of students who change schools**

My research into the experiences of itinerant farm workers' children in school literacy learning suggested that children's strengths that did not match the valued and normalised practices of schooling were often invisible to teachers (e.g. Henderson, 2008a, 2008c, 2009). As Heath's (1983) research demonstrated, some literacy practices are valued in school contexts and others are not, resulting in some children being franchised and others disenfranchised. In the case studies I conducted, this was particularly the case when teachers focused on the perceived deficiencies of the children and their families. In fact, many teachers seemed to draw on dominant discourses founded in deficit logic, whereby children's itinerancy, ESL background or low socio-economic status was regarded as an indicator that school literacy learning was likely to be unsuccessful. However, there were exceptions to this and some teachers were able to resist the deficit discourses that circulated in both the school and its surrounding community (e.g. Henderson, 2008a).

My interviews with the case study families revealed aspects of their itinerant lifestyles that were generally not visible to teachers. Almost without exception, the parents supported school processes and were keen for their children to succeed educationally. Nevertheless, family decisions about whether to remain in one place or to move elsewhere were often made in relation to a range of issues that included health, welfare and financial considerations. The decisions made by families did not always give education the priority that the teachers thought it deserved, but the reasons behind these decisions often remained invisible and unexplained to teachers. As a result, it is probably understandable that teachers often concluded that the families did not regard education as important. In this way, the invisibility of families' out-of-school practices helped to ensure that a variety of stereotypical understandings about itinerant students and their families were maintained.

However, it should also be pointed out that teachers' misunderstandings about the realities of the families' lives were sometimes the result of families keeping their home lives deliberately hidden from school personnel. There were times when families did not want to reveal practices that they thought would bring criticism from teachers or from the community. One family, for example, had decided to keep their tattoos hidden, as they thought they were less likely to be accepted by the community if the tattoos were visible (Henderson, 2008a). In another family, the parents did not want teachers to know that one of their school-aged children had not attended school for many months (Henderson, 2008b). However, their concern about the legal implications of their decision meant that their child was reluctant to ask the teacher for assistance with literacy learning, in case the family's secret was revealed. In the long term, this decision impacted further on the child's chances of educational success.

Furthermore, several of the children explained in interviews that they deliberately hid the educational difficulties they were experiencing from teachers and from their peers. In arriving at a new school, they did not want to stand out from other students in their class, so they often pretended that they could cope. It also appeared that some of the children unwittingly led teachers to believe that they were able to operate successfully in the classroom. Several of the children had effective strategies for coping with their arrival in a new class, but their ability to do this did not translate into academic success (Henderson, 2004).

Many of the children talked about how they repeated particular literacy learning when they moved from a school in Victoria to the school in Queensland, and vice versa. Although they not talk particularly about missing topics completely, it was evident that this was another issue (Henderson, 2005). It also appeared that the children's limited knowledge of classroom activities and school and community events that had occurred prior to their arrival often put them at a disadvantage in the classroom. Huge gaps in their background and contextual knowledge seemed to underpin some of the difficulties they experienced in coping with the literacy learning that was on offer.

To sum up the research findings, it was apparent that working with 'new' students is not necessarily as straightforward as might be assumed. It became clear that:

- students' strengths in literacy learning were not always obvious to teachers;
- many aspects of the students' and families' lives were invisible to teachers;
- families sometimes hid aspects of their lives from school personnel;
- students sometimes set out to hide the academic difficulties they were experiencing from teachers;
- students sometimes gave the impression that they could cope academically even when they could not;
- students often had gaps in background and contextual knowledges that were needed for successful learning;

- it was not unusual for teachers to draw stereotypical conclusions about students' and families' lives and interests in education;
- many teachers drew on dominant discursive constructions, linking student mobility to deficiencies in school literacy learning and a lack of academic success, and
- teachers often had low academic expectations of the itinerant students.

It appears, then, that Heath's (1983) 'ways with words' provides at least a partial explanation of the situation. The 'ways with words' of this particular group of students were not always visible within the school context. At the same time, the 'ways with words' of the school community were not always accessible by students who were newly arrived in the school context.

### **Important considerations for teaching students who have changed schools**

An important consideration for teachers, then, is to find the 'ways with words' that will engage students who have changed schools and that will ensure their success in school literacy learning. As was explained earlier, this is more about reconsidering and refining teaching practices than looking for specific or innovative pedagogies.

A key issue for a teacher with a new student in the class is that the student may not have the specific background knowledge that has been developed over time with other students, whether that be on the previous day to the new student's arrival or over a period of a week, a month or even a semester. Additionally, a new student may not have contextual knowledge of the school – its ways of doing things, its practices or its recent events – or knowledge of the community surrounding the school. It is important, therefore, that there are opportunities for the student to make connections from his/her life-world and prior knowledge to what is happening in the classroom.

This might mean ensuring that there are opportunities for what The New London Group (1996) called situated practice. Through being immersed in literacy learning experiences and thus being able to make connections in familiar and new contexts, it would seem that students are more likely to be able to connect new learning to what they already know. As highlighted by Kalantzis and Cope (2009), situated practice provides opportunities for "experiencing the known" and reflecting on "experiences, interests, perspectives, familiar forms of expression and ways of representing the world in one's own understanding" (p. 185). The advantage for students new to a class is that they can bring "their own, invariably diverse knowledge, experiences, interests and life-texts to the learning situation" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2009, p. 185), but this requires teachers to be open to, and accepting of, new perspectives.

Additionally, situated practice can incorporate "experiencing the new" which means that students are "exposed to new information, experiences and texts, but only within the zone of intelligibility and safety, sufficiently close to their own life-worlds to be at least half meaningful in the first instance" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2009, p. 185). Such experiences would seem to be essential for students who are new to a class. Moreover, situated practice can also provide opportunities for teachers to engage in

informal assessments of students' knowledges and learning through a range of assessment techniques, including observation and consultation.

Effective assessment of students' literacy learning can help to avoid the assumptions that are sometimes made about students and their reasons for changing schools. As Thomson's (2002) metaphor of the virtual backpack highlights, it is important that teachers identify the types of literacy practices and strengths students have, in order to avoid narrow and/or inaccurate understandings of what students can or cannot do. Whilst it would seem that it is not always easy to learn that information from within the school context, some of the teachers who worked in Comber and Kamler's (2005) project on "turn-around pedagogies" found that looking outside school was an effective strategy. Petersen (2005), for example, used home visits as a way of becoming familiar with students' lives and he incorporated students' interests into classroom learning as a way of motivating literacy learning.

By making sure there are opportunities for critical framing (The New London Group, 1996), teachers can assist students to understand the social, cultural, political and ideological dimensions of their knowledges and understandings. If different knowledges are valued within classroom contexts, then it is more likely that new students will feel a sense of belonging and be able to engage in classroom activities and learning (Kalantzis, Cope, & the Learning by Design Project Group, 2005). As The New London Group (1996) highlighted, teachers have a role in helping "learners to denaturalise and make strange again what they have learned and mastered" (p. 34). They go on to explain that critical framing allows learners to "gain the necessary personal and theoretical distance from what they have learned; constructively critique it; account for its cultural location; creatively extend and apply it; and eventually innovate on their own, within old communities and in new ones" (p. 34).

The inclusion of critical framing, then, has the potential to be useful for all students, regardless of whether they are mobile or residentially stable. By ensuring that students have a sense of belonging to the learning that is on offer and giving them opportunities to analyse what they know, then it will help them to learn and, as Kalantzis et al. (2005) explained, to move "away from the learner's comfort zone, away from the narrowness and limitations of the lifeworld" (p. 47). To Kalantzis et al., this is an important component of learning that goes beyond simply "recognising and affirming difference" (p. 47).

Where possible, it is also helpful to consider the speed with which these pedagogical considerations need to occur. It is important that students are able to begin their learning journeys in a new school immediately upon their arrival. While records from previous schools will sometimes be available, this will not always be the case, especially if students have moved across state borders. Thus teachers need to commence the process of evaluating students' capabilities within the particular context of that classroom as quickly as possible. The identification of students' literacy strengths and the diagnosis of their literacy weaknesses provide starting points for new learning. Without this information,

intervention and targeted explicit teaching – or overt instruction, to use the term coined by The New London Group (1996) – cannot begin. As The New London Group explained, this includes “all those active interventions on the part of the teachers and other experts that scaffold learning activities” (p. 86).

## **Conclusion**

This article has highlighted the increasing mobility of the Australian population and some of the pedagogical considerations that would seem relevant to literacy teachers when teaching students who are newly arrived in their classrooms. Drawing on the findings of research into the school literacy learning of itinerant farm workers’ children, the article provides some initial suggestions about how teachers might ensure the success of ‘new’ students.

What is obvious, however, is that these suggestions are not revolutionary or earth-shaking. Indeed, they seem to fit Kalantzis et al.’s (2005) description of pedagogical ideas that are “no more than the ordinary stuff of good teaching” (p. 66) and they might be identified as the types of practices that should be evident in the classrooms of all literacy teachers. Nevertheless, as Kalantzis et al. explained, the “ordinary stuff of good teaching” can be “magically extraordinary” when students have a sense of belonging in the learning (p. 66).

This paper, then, has highlighted the importance of effective pedagogy when catering for all students, regardless of their mobile/residential status. The following list suggests a set of principles for guiding these considerations when teaching students who have changed schools:

- avoid stereotypical assumptions and think creatively to find out about the particular ‘ways with words’ of new students;
- help students to make links between their life-world experiences and learning in their new classroom;
- provide opportunities for all students to think critically about their knowledge and understandings and how they are located socially, culturally, politically and ideologically;
- act quickly to assess students’ literacy strengths and weaknesses, and
- provide targeted intervention as quickly as possible.

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