Children on the move

The social and educational effects of family mobility

Barry A. Fields

Compared with other Western countries Australia stands out as having one of the most highly mobile populations. Despite this, there is very little recognition of this phenomenon and its social and educational effects. School personnel are particularly culpable in this regard, maintaining an image of schooling as a system focussed on relatively stable class groups. The available data, however, paint a very different picture, and one which compels the attention of not only educators but also a variety of individuals from the helping professions and welfare agencies. This article explores the nature of student mobility, its effects on children, and their adjustment to school.

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Australia has one of the most highly mobile populations in the Western world, and yet this significant demographic feature of life in this country is not widely recognized or acknowledged by the community or by the nation's policy makers. There exists an illusion of stability in both the workplace and in domestic life (Settles 1993).

Population mobility

During the intercensal period 1981-86 and 1986-91, 40.7% of Australia's population or approximately 7 million persons changed their permanent address one or more times (Bell 1995). The 'average' Australian reportedly moves more than eleven times during his/her lifetime (Bell 1995), making this country's population one of the most highly mobile in the world (Long 1992). Indeed there are 'hundreds of thousands of Australians who do not know from week to week where they will be living in, say, three months time' (Rahmani & Scherer 1982, p. 24). These Australians include mobile home dwellers, the country's 70,000 military service personnel, itinerant mine-workers, fruit pickers, shearers, construction workers, and workers in the fishing industry. They also include police and bank officers, geologists, and even teachers (Welch 1987; Wyer 1992). The social and economic impact of this level of mobility is considerable, with implications for almost all aspects of economic and community life.

The data for children are equally informative. A staggering 46.1% of children between the ages of 5 and 9 years, and 38.5% of children between the ages of 10 and 14 years relocated one or more times during the most recent intercensal period (Bell 1995). It has been estimated that about 100,000 children and adolescents change their residence and school each year (Welch 1987).

Reasons for mobility

Glick (1993) classified the reasons for moving into three broad categories: forced, imposed, and preference dominated. Families forced to move included those displaced by natural disaster, eg, fire or flood, as well as those evicted from their dwellings because of failure to pay rent, or because of urban renewal plans involving the resumption of property by landlords and, in some instances, demolition.

Imposed moves are most often associated with family dynamics, such as a change in marital status, eg, divorce, separation, death of a spouse; the need for a larger residence; and moves associated with employment requirements. Some particular examples of the latter reason would be transfers imposed on individuals in the defence forces, transfers of bank officers, and public servants such as teachers and police officers.

Unforced moves are usually carefully considered decisions made to move to a new, perceived to be better dwelling and neighbourhood; to be closer to a school or university; to be closer to relatives or friends; to take a promotion which entails a transfer; or to start a new job. We can only assume that forced moves are associated with more trauma and resettlement difficulties, but on this question there is very little research data available (Warren-Sohlberg & Jason 1992)

Mobility and academic performance

It is widely believed that children who change schools are frequently adversely affected by the experience. Research on the effects of student mobility seems to support this belief. Numerous international studies have found that highly mobile students are more likely to achieve at lower levels in reading and mathematics than their more stable peers (Brent & DiObilda 1993; Mehana & Reynolds 1995; Miller & Cherry 1991; Schuler 1990; Williams 1996: Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck & Nissim 1993).

A number of 'system level' investigations of the effects of student mobility have been conducted in the United States (see, for example, Cleveland Public Schools 1989; Ingersoll, Scamman & Echerling 1989; New York State Education Department 1992). These studies confirm the results of smaller investigations conducted over the past thirty years of the link between mobility and school achievement. The Cleveland study, for example, found that highly mobile students had poorer attendance records, a greater likelihood of dropping out or being suspended from school, more chance of being retained at a grade level, and significantly more referrals and assessments for reading difficulties. This study, like the many others that preceded and followed it, found mobile students performed more poorly than stable students on standardised reading and mathematics tests. The negative effects of mobility have been strongest for urban children (Ingersoll, Scamman & Echerling 1989; Schuler 1989), the children of low income families (Corcoran 1995; Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite 1995; US General Accounting Office 1994), and children whose parents have less than eight years of schooling (Long 1975; Straits 1987).

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Australian research

Two recent studies provide some insight into the impact of mobility on Australian children. Fields (1995) investigated the academic achievement, social adjustment and peer acceptance of 40 highly mobile 10-15 year old Queensland school students. These students had experienced three or more changes of school in the preceding two years. Teachers were asked to assign the mobile students to one of three levels of academic achievement based on their assessment of the students' performance in English Language Arts. Eighteen (45%) were assessed as performing in the bottom third of their class; 19 (47.5%) were assessed as performing in the middle of the class. Just three students were assessed as being in the top third of their class in English. Using the Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment (Walker & McConnell 1987), 70% of the sample were found to have significant social and school adjustment problems. This latter finding was reinforced by data from peer ratings. Across the 40 classrooms represented in the study (960 students in total), the mean rating for peer acceptance was 3.3 on a six point scale (0 - 5). The mean rating for the sample of mobile students was 1.7. Only four subjects received ratings at or above the mean for the total enrolment of the 40 classrooms.

In a second Australian study conducted in four Western Australian schools, the academic achievement of 144 transient 4-8 year olds was compared with their more residentially stable peers (Birch & Lally 1995). Academic achievement was measured through a combination of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - Form M (PPVT - M), the British Ability Scales, the Stanford Alphabet Test, and a phonological awareness test, depending on the subject's grade level. Transient students scored marginally lower on these ability tests compared to non-transient students. The higher the grade level, the greater the difference. This latter finding suggests that transience can have a compound effect on achievement. When interviewed, the teachers at the four schools thought most mobile children experienced short-term and temporary problems but frequent changes had a more severe negative effect on school performance. They also expressed the view that family background and support were influential in how well a child adjusted to a new school environment.

Social and emotional impact of mobility

The Coddington Life Events Record (Johnson 1987), an instrument for measuring stressful life events among children, places changing schools on a par with the hospitalisation of a parent for a serious illness or having a parent in jail for up to thirty days (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber 1996). Such is the perceived impact of school mobility on the social and emotional well-being of children.

Critics of life stress research, however, have cautioned about placing too much emphasis on stressful life events as direct precipitators of behavioural and emotional problems in children (Kessler, Price & Wortman 1985; Wertlieb, Weigel & Feldstein 1987).

They point to the fact that such events account for only about ten per cent of the variance in children's behaviour. It is now believed that changes which are unwelcome and undesirable are more likely to bring about undue stress and associated adjustment problems, and that where the events are associated with other undesirable stressors, the likelihood of maladjustment is exponentially multiplied (Rutter 1981). Jalongo (1994/95) provides a good example of multiple stressors in the life of a five-year-old who has been forced to relocate:

> After his parents separated, he and his mother moved from their rural home to an urban apartment. Although the apartment is just one hour away from his old house, his situation has been radically altered. In one year, Justin became part of a single-parent family; fell below the poverty line; left his teacher, school and friends; moved farther away from his grandparents and other relatives; lost his outdoor play area and had to give away his puppy. Justin's experience exemplifies the significant losses that may accompany moving. (Jalongo 1994/95, p. 80)

It is not unusual then to find children in Justin's situation exhibiting symptoms of unhappiness, depression, nervousness, aggression (especially among boys), social withdrawal, dependence and need for attention; behaviours such as feigning illness, and a variety of other defensive behaviours typical of school refusal syndrome (Brown & Orthner 1990; Keat, Crabbs & Crabbs 1981; Newcomb, Huba & Bentler 1981; Turner & McClatchey 1978).

The adaptive demands of moving to a new school are great, particularly where the new school is very different from the previous one and when the move is made during the school year (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford 1983). Some of the demands include:

- becoming familiar with the physical layout of the new school and what to do with personal property;
- adjusting to new teachers;
- adjusting to changes in academic emphasis, curriculum, and the pace at which the curriculum is covered;
- changes in personal role definition and expected behaviours;
- changes in membership in and position within peer social groups; and
- reorganising personal and social support resources

(Jason et al 1992).

Defence force family mobility

The children of military families have been studied extensively both overseas and in Australia. Mobility is typically high for this group. Studies of the children of military personnel have showed the 'favorable and non-significant but not negative effects of mobility' (Mehana & Reynolds 1995, p. 4). Two large scale Australian studies (Bourke & Naylor 1971; Mackay & Spicer 1975), and two smaller studies (Collins & Coulter 1974; Rahmani 1981) found no significant negative effects on measures of academic achievement and social adjustment for the children of defence force families.

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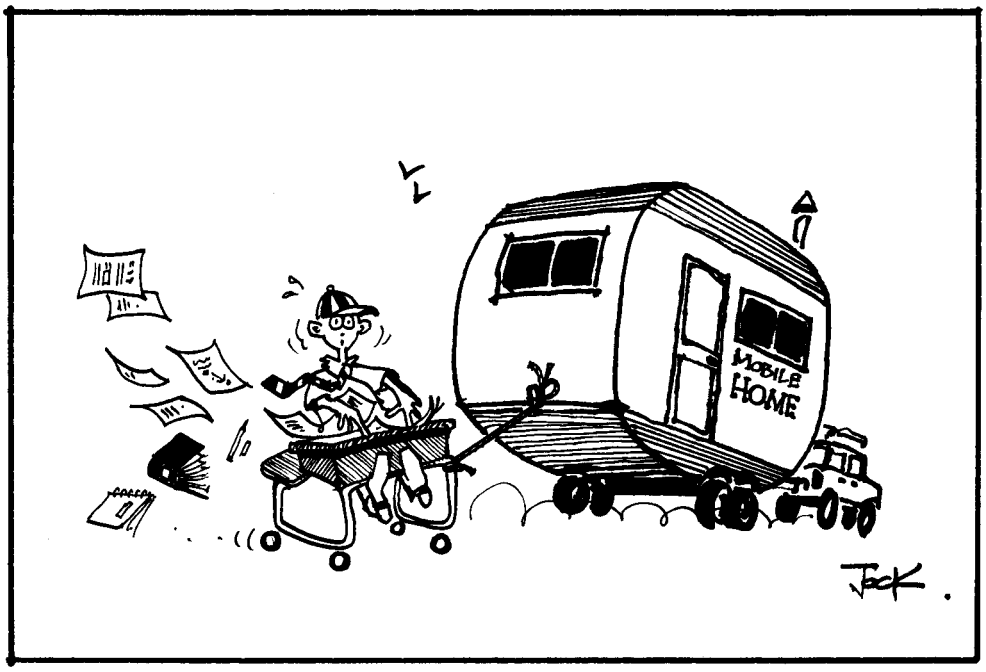
Duffy (1987) offers several reasons for the conflicting findings in studies of defence force families as compared to studies of mobile children in the civilian population. The experiences of the two groups, Duffy states, may not be the same. Service life, Duffy concludes, is highly structured and authoritarian, and this facilitates the acceptance of occupational geographic mobility and related relocation difficulties. The services, Duffy notes, are also characterized by a degree of social cohesion not found in other occupations. Often moves may involve several families so that social links are maintained to some extent. Unlike moves in other occupations which are often related to the cessation of employment, financial difficulties, and insecurity of accommodation, Duffy argues that moves by service families are relatively free of employment concerns and housing uncertainties. Finally, there are in place the services, support mechanisms and programs to assist all members of the family including children and their adjustment to a new school. Services are offered through Australian Defence Families Information and Liaison Staff (ADFILS) and Family Information Network for Defence (FIND).

School transfers without family relocation

One little explored facet of student mobility relates to moves from one school to another in the same geographical vicinity, often with no more than a few kilometres separating the two schools (Cornille, Bayer & Smyth 1983). These moves typically involve no residential relocation and are often initiated because of problems experienced by the children at the original school and/or parental dissatisfaction with the original school. This is in contrast with the more commonly believed and cited reasons for relocation such as those related to housing, employment and family problems. It is not uncommon to find parents moving their children several times within the same locality for the same reason or set of reasons. Some children return to their original school after a year or so of unsuccessful changes.

We know very little about the overall success of such transfers and whether or not children in this category have fewer or more adjustment problems. As Marchant and Medway (1987) have pointed out, it has been a major flaw in mobility research that authors fail to



distinguish whether school transfers involve a change in family residence. Indeed, there has been very little attempt to clearly describe and distinguish any of the reasons for transfer in virtually all of the literature on student mobility. One exception is the Fields (1995) study where the sample of 40 highly mobile students was carefully selected from a larger pool of mobile students for which detailed case descriptions and other school performance information had been gathered from school sources. Excluded from the sample were mobile children from defence force families, and children from families where there was a known history of marital and/or family stress, drug and alcohol abuse, and child abuse. The study attempted, as far as possible, to isolate mobility itself as the key variable in the subsequent investigation of school adjustment.

In another study Fields (1994) focussed specifically on the reasons for short distance school transfers involving no change of family residence for 60 primary school students. Financial, employment, and family problems did not feature in the reasons cited by parents and known by class teachers. Most reasons fell into two broad categories: peer relations (not being able to make friends, bullying) and school/curriculum concerns (transfer child's disruptive behaviour, parent-teacher/principal conflict, child's level of achievement, and perceived problems with the standard of teaching, disinterested teachers, lack of challenge in the curriculum, lack of resources, and limited services for children with special needs).

Parent perceptions of the success of the move and teacher observations about the adjustment of the transfer children to the new school were surveyed. About half of the transfers were rated as successful. Transfers prompted by peer problems (bullying), behavioural problems and poor achievement levels in the original school were less successful, these difficulties continuing or reappearing after a time in the new school. The 'fresh start' seen by many parents as the solution to the problem turned out to be false hope, with the decision to move appearing more like an attempt to avoid the problem rather than a genuine attempt to resolve it.

Support programs

In 1988, in response to widespread community concern about the difficulties experienced by children moving to a new school in another State or Territory, the Australian Education Council established the Working Party on Mobility Issues. The brief of the working party was to describe and develop successful strategies for minimizing the problems experienced by students moving between State and Territory school systems. A series of four resource booklets were produced by the working party. These included a guide to good practice, and specific guides directed at schools, parents, and employers (Fennell & Boys 1991; Fennell & Edwards 1991a; Fennell & Edwards 1991b; Fennell & Edwards 1991c). These four guides were published by the Curriculum Corporation and widely disseminated throughout Australia. They remain today the most comprehensive and authoritative Australian reference on how schools can assist mobile children.

Fennell and Edwards (1991a) describe the features of schools which handle mobility issues well. These schools typically:

- have a strategic plan which is communicated to all stakeholders and which is reviewed regularly;
- are genuinely student centred and sensitive to the needs of their clients;
- have well-defined procedures for involving parents and students in school affairs;
- have policies and strategies for assisting mobile students incorporated into the general education and student welfare programs of the school;
- have systematic procedures for inducting new students into the school and assisting out-going students; and
- have clearly defined policies and procedures for keeping track of student progress and reporting this to parents and future schools.

Collectively, the reports produced by the AEC working party reinforce many of the recommendations for good practice found in the international literature on programs for mobile

students. Six stand out as being particularly important:

1. The urgency for each school to become more aware of their particular mobility problems. Specifically, schools need to know the average number of mobile students enrolled in previous years, age ranges and year levels most affected, length of enrolment, cultural backgrounds, educational backgrounds, and difficulties (academic and social) encountered by the students.
2. The development of an orientation program for new arrivals, focussed on welcoming the students and their parents, and familiarising them with the school's policies and goals, organisation and procedures, and responding to specific concerns and needs the students and parents may have.
3. The accurate and appropriate placement of students in year level and class. Inappropriate placements are a major cause of concern to parents and frustration to students. While a 'perfect match' is seldom achieved, the aim should be to collect as much information as possible, and to involve parents and students in the decision making process.
4. The establishment of mobility support groups for both students and parents. The student groups could comprise mobile students and a teacher, counsellor or guidance officer. The focus of the group meetings would be on discussing experiences and sharing feelings. Parent groups would focus on helping parents understand their children's feelings about moving, how these feelings might be expressed behaviourally, and ways parents can help their children cope with the transition.
5. The compilation of a Personal School Portfolio. This portfolio would consist of class and school level materials collected during the term of the student's enrolment and designed to show the schooling experience and level of achievement of the student.
6. A collection of resource material (books, videotapes, etc.) related to mobility. These resources would be used for teacher professional development, mobility support group references, and where possible for incorporation into the general academic curriculum of the school.

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Conclusion

Australia has always had high levels of internal population migration and this trend is likely to continue. It is imperative that social institutions such as schools recognize that they are dealing with enrolment patterns which reflect this population trend and that children and families can, and frequently do, experience adjustment problems after relocating. While there is still much to be learned about the nature of the relocation experience and how it affects children, parents and school personnel, there are strategies and programs available which can substantially reduce the negative impact of mobility. What is missing is a broad recognition of the significance of the problem as a social and educational issue. Such recognition should be the impetus for a far greater resolve to do something about it. □

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