

Occasional Papers

Transient Children:

Perceptions of How Often Transient Children Come and Go

by Anna Lee

The educational needs of transient children are often overlooked. Without an effective support system in school, transient children may underachieve and run the risk of graduating to the criminal justice system. But schools can do a lot to minimise that risk. Anna Lee's research shows that effective programmes can significantly enhance these students' learning and facilitate positive relationships between their families and teachers.

This research gauged the level of transience of children in ten Auckland intermediate schools. It surveyed principals or delegated deputy principals or assistant principals of the ten intermediate schools. 5124 children were included in the calculation of the 1999 percentage of roll turnover recorded in the ten schools.

The project investigated the following:

1. How many schools children had attended by year eight and for each preceding year of each child's schooling. The sample of schools included five schools at decile one, the lowest socio-economic group and five schools at decile nine or ten the highest socio-economic groups.
2. How the principal or delegated person of each school in the sample perceived the effects of transient children who attend their school, on the school culture and learning programmes.

For this project "transient" referred to those students who have attended three schools or more in a 12 month period, from the first of January in one year to the first of January in the following year.

The study's literature examination focused upon children from lower socio-economic families. The findings confirm that school change had a significant negative impact for these children. Many of the suggestions for positive educational strategies highlighted in this study would benefit transient children from all socio-economic groups.

Responses to the questionnaire

Respondents from decile one schools expressed concern about transient children's behaviour; difficulty in making new friends; and the completion of studies. Responses from the decile nine and ten schools indicated that the few transient children they have had little impact on those schools. One school in each of the decile groups had a specific plan to assess and place a new child who arrived during the year.

Respondents to the questionnaire cited similar causes for transience according to the decile school they represented. The decile one schools raised economic deprivation and social breakdown. Decile nine and ten schools identified employment relocation, immigration and migration. The principal from one school in each decile group had been involved in some professional discussion related to transient children. The principal in the school with the third lowest roll turnover had completed an investigation and produced a written report for that school.

The negative impact of transient children was acknowledged by all the decile one schools. Despite this, only one principal from this group of schools had been involved in professional discussions about the issue. This was not surprising considering the lack of research and strategies available to schools, or recognition or acknowledgement by policy makers about the issue of student transience.

Schools attended

Of the decile one schools, the percentage of children who had attended three or more schools in any school year in their eight years of schooling ranged from 11.66% to 17.19%, with the exception of school four where it was 4.35%. It was also the same decile one school, which had the lowest roll turnover of the decile one schools. Of the decile one schools, 10% of boys and 16.11% of girls had attended three or more schools in any school year in their eight years of schooling.

Of the decile nine and ten schools the percentage of children who had attended three or more schools in any school year in the eight years of schooling ranged from 0.42% to 5.38%. Compared to decile one schools, this showed a significantly lower percentage of children who had attended three or more schools in any school year of the eight years of schooling among children at the decile nine and ten schools. In these schools 2.94% of boys and 2.44% of girls had attended three or more schools in any school year in their eight years of schooling.

According to the Arnerich (2000) formula the roll turnover in the decile one schools ranged from 7.73% to 23.26%. This was a range of 15.53%. However, the range of roll turnover in the decile nine and ten school was significantly less. It ranged from 4.63% to 7.85%. This was a range of 3.22%.

The Arnerich formula divides the number of children who left school in a year by the total number of children at the school .

The percentages given by the Arnerich formula were significantly smaller than from other calculations for transience because it only included children leaving the school during the year but not those who joined it. A future official formula to calculate roll turnover will be needed to test the formula in a variety of schools in order to ascertain how specific characteristics of some schools, such as intermediate schools, caused these characteristics to inaccurately reflect the schools' actual situation.



Anna Lee after receiving her NZEI Te Riu Roa scholarship at Annual Meeting 2000.

Anna Lee has both a practical and theoretical understanding of the needs of transient children. As a child she attended 12 schools, and later as a teacher worked in low decile Auckland schools where she says transience is “a perennial problem”.

“One of the biggest problems is that schools, even those that have good support systems for these children, have just come to accept that little can be done about transience,” says Anna who was awarded a NZEI Te Riu Roa Scholarship last year to research the issue. In her study she recommends a range of measures to tackle the problem, from establishing a national system to identify transients to professional development to support teachers of transient children.

“Some of the measures I suggest cost very little money such as developing a welcoming culture within the school, creating non-violent environments so that the children are comfortable and won’t be bullied, and adapting the classroom programme to meet the needs of these children.”

Anna says she had two aims in undertaking the research. “One was to provide hard data that could be used by NZEI to lobby and advocate for transient students and the other was to help families and schools with some practical support. Unless transient children are assisted in learning and behaviour, it’s going to affect other children, so helping those children helps all children.”

Anna believes that it’s important that parents are educated about the negative effects of frequently changing schools. Often poor families have to move for work or housing reasons. “I’m not into blaming the victim because I think that’s very unhelpful but I do feel that some parents are unaware that changing schools does have a detrimental effect. One of the major reasons for that is that children lose their friendships, their links to the community so when they go to a new school they become distracted with making new links and that overrides their focus on learning. Some teachers may be unaware of that too.”

Transience, says Anna, has an adverse effect on children’s learning when it is for negative reasons. However, “people who are more affluent move for a better life or job promotion and that doesn’t have a detrimental effect.” Transience is not related to any particular ethnic group. “If you’re poor, you’re likely to be transient no matter which ethnic group you belong to.”



Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour Anna Lee working with teacher aide Heather Kett and year 7 and 8 students at Mansell Senior School, formerly Papakura Intermediate School.

The high percentages of roll turnover and student transience were common to all but one decile one school. Similarly the low rates of turnover were common to all the decile nine and ten schools surveyed. This supported the findings of previous studies, which showed that school change was significantly higher in lower socio-economic schools.

There was no specific information that could suggest why school four, the decile one school that was the second to smallest school had a significantly lower roll turnover than the other decile one schools. Any future study will need to be sufficiently large to ensure the collection of data was representative of the conditions in a number of schools.

Another unanticipated result was that in the decile one schools 10% of the boys and 16.11% of the girls had attended three or more schools in at least one year of their eight years of schooling. However there was no reference in the literature examined to variations to children's transience being associated with their gender.

Definitions of transient/mobile children

An area of difficulty in this study was that in New Zealand there is no nationally established definition of a transient child or of levels of transience. However, for this study the description of children who change school frequently followed that used by NZEI Te Riu Roa (1999), which defined "as 'transient' those students who have attended three schools or more in a 12-month period" (p.1). Although these two descriptions clearly state three schools in a 12-month period, to enable the easier collection of data the number of schools attended by each child were counted by the school year. Therefore the actual level of transience would have been higher in this study if the student attending three schools in a 12-month period had been used. This implies that further studies, which accurately used these definitions, may find the level of transience to be higher.

The NZEI Te Riu Roa definition only addresses the children who have moved school three times within 12 months not the children who have attended many schools but not three or more in the space of a year. These factors need to be examined when criteria for providing support for transient children are established. Definitions used by other studies of transience or mobility identified transience more rigorously than the one used in this study.

Possible causes and results of child transience – an analysis of previous studies

Many researchers in the last two decades have found a negative relationship between student mobility and academic performance and economically disadvantaged children had a higher rate of mobility.

Fields (1997) maintained that "changes which are unwelcome and undesirable are more likely to bring about undue stress and associated adjustment problems, where the events are associated with other undesirable stressors, the likelihood of maladjustment is exponentially multiplied".

Kariuku, Nash and College (1999) found:

- Educators considered that it was important to remain in a constant learning environment.
- Lower socio-economic status children did not perform as well academically as more advantaged children.

- Moves that occurred during the summer break caused fewer traumas.

Neighbour (1999) blamed part of the increasing problem of transience on state house rentals and benefit cuts. Collins (2000) claimed that the introduction of Employment Contracts Act and the welfare benefits cuts in 1991, the Housing New Zealand market rental policy in 1992, all combined to produce poverty, which forced families into homelessness. Johnson (2000) maintained that the decline in home ownership by working class families had increased transience and mobility of families.

Collins (2000) stated that in 1998 poverty affected 19.3 percent of New Zealanders and Stephens, Waldegrave and Fraser (1995) found that one in three New Zealand children lived below the poverty line.

Bishop and Glynn (1999) maintained that the introduction of “new right” policies since 1984, on top of the colonial domination, have exacerbated the social outcomes for Maori with “victim-blaming policies”. Newman (1988) argued that highly transient children “may display symptoms similar to those with specific learning disabilities” (p.5).

In addition, other reasons given for children changing schools were changes in the primary caregiver, separation, changes in custody arrangements, alternative care arrangements through the extended family and whanau or the Children and Young Persons and their Families Service or as a result of expulsion, pregnancy and illness.

Strand (2000) maintained that the relatively low attainment levels of mobile pupils had a strong link with disadvantage factors in their background, such as low family income, limited fluency in English and the higher incidence and increased severity of special needs, along with poor attendance. Fields (1994) maintained that these families often had a history of unemployment, divorce, single parent families, economic disadvantage, physical, sexual, and drug abuse all linked to children who have difficulty in developing social and academic achievement.

Danaher, Wyer and Bartlett (1998) described the students in their study as being outside the realm of power, wealth and cultural capital and noted that it was improbable that they would break from this disadvantaged position.

However, legally compulsory school attendance places an obligation on the state and parents or caregivers to assure access to free education. This should mean providing all students with the educational opportunities which will enable them to develop their potential.

Bruno and Isken (1996) found a “nearly uniform negative impact of student transience on academic attainment, with the most negative effects occurring in the early years”. However Vail (1996) found that the transient children also had a large negative impact on the academic attainment of stable students.

Support for transient children

Church (1994) and Slavin, Karweit and Wasik (1994) argued that inevitably money would have to be spent on “at risk students”. Evidence, reason and humanity would suggest that it was more effective to provide prevention rather than correction, which tended to be less successful. New Zealand has minimal researched information about transient children. Currently no national formula for roll turnover, nor definition for transience exists and there is no national Ministry of Education intervention support plan.

New students arrive with no prior warning. Instructional time is lost settling the child in, reviewing rules, routines and procedures and dealing with behaviour problems. The child also needs additional individual help, class re-organisation and increased administration. These factors disrupted the continuity of teaching for the stable children.

Strategies to alleviate transience

Within New Zealand the recent increase in homelessness and transience are inseparably linked to the “free market” policies, which have dominated New Zealand politics since the late 1980s.

Vail (1996) maintained that schools were “unable to solve the social problems that produced mobility, but schools could do things to make transience easier on their students and themselves”.

Some schools-based suggestions to support transient children made by previous studies included:

1. The implementation of social processes in the playground to facilitate inclusion of transient children.
2. Welcoming systems.
3. The establishment of a “buddy system” to assist the child to establish friendships easily and to dissipate bullying.
4. The implementation of ‘Equal Opportunities’ to ensure that transient children received the same educational opportunities as all other children.
5. The development of school policies and recommended strategies that are implemented at a school level to cater for transient children.
6. The development of an inclusive and supportive school culture for children, their families and staff.
7. Strategies to provide appropriate placement to support the transient child’s academic needs.
8. The provision of professional development for all staff.
9. The inclusion of encouragement and empathy to support the emotional needs of teachers.
10. Adjusting class design and schedules.
11. Multi-age classrooms that can provide remedial instruction.
12. Consideration of the effects of reconfiguring classes to adjust class sizes.
13. Discussion of assessment and reporting processes for transient children.
14. The effective use of important information provided in transfer files.
15. Improved communication of student records between schools.
16. Putting student records “on line”.
17. Flexible attendance and transport policies.
18. Providing transport.
19. The investigation of methods, in addition to print, to communicate with parents.
20. The development of improved opportunities for parents and students to be involved in decisions.
21. Specific staff to promptly and carefully forward the school records and the Record of Schools Attended.
22. The checking of student record folders leaving and arriving in the school to be made by non-office staff.

A major frustration that emerged in the literature was the lack of official recognition of transient children's educational needs with advocacy for an effective, sustainable and nationally applied services and strategies to support transient children. Church (1996) stated that our inability to provide specialised educational programmes for behaviour disordered children results in large proportions of disordered children graduating to the criminal justice system.

Summary

Political policies of the last fifteen years in New Zealand have accentuated factors which cause families to move and children to change school. This would require a long term political commitment to reverse.

However, specifically adapted support for children who change school frequently, in partnership with their families, could significantly improve the children's success at school. To enable schools to provide the best support possible there needs to be a nationally applied definition of transience and a formula to calculate roll turnover. In addition, there needed to be long term targeted funding to the specific children. Schools with high roll turnover need funding to compensate the stable children who are detrimentally affected by the presence of transient children. Schools with high roll turnover need additional funding to provide for extra administration. Finally, they need specific professional development to assist staff, improved systems for identifying children and to facilitate the swift transfer of files and sharing of effective teaching practice.

Of major concern is the lack of New Zealand information including the extent of transience, as well as the lack of systems and shared practice to support transient children. In spite of this, some individual schools and teachers had initiated effective supports for children who changed school frequently.

For the Ministry of Education and schools to respond to the needs of children who change school frequently there needs to be wide ranging research into the extent of transience and the needs of New Zealand children who change school frequently. The Ministry of Education needs to develop and implement policy to provide additional support for transient children and schools with high roll turnover.

Recommendations

It would be useful to examine some issues, which may maintain on-going support or alleviate difficulties for children in New Zealand who move school frequently.

Useful areas to explore could be:

1. The development of a nationally accepted definition of transience.
2. The formulation of a nationally accepted formula to calculate roll turnover.
3. The implementation of NZEI Te Rui Roa's recommendation 3, 1998, with future amendments, by the Ministry of Education¹.
4. The Ministry of Education to develop long term policies and financial support to assist transient children and schools with high roll turnovers.
5. The Ministry of Education to establish a national system to identify transient children, to assist with the swift transmission of up to date records, to alert their

new school to Ministry support available for transient children and to assist in the national collection of data about transient children.

6. The Ministry of Education issue guidelines to top level educational and administrative personnel to provide support and to emphasise the moral and legal obligation of schools and teachers to support transient children.
7. A substantial investigation into transient children and their academic performance in school from a range of deciles.
8. An investigation into the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies to assist children to develop skills that help them integrate with existing peer groups when they attend a new school.
9. An investigation of successful support currently being practised in schools with the intention of making these practices easily available to all schools.
10. The development of pre and post training professional development to support teachers of transient children.
11. An investigation of transient children and their parent/caregivers perspective on the effects of school practices on the child and family.
12. An investigation of school change initiated by the school as a result of disciplinary practices.
13. An investigation into the implementation of community education programmes targeted to inform parents who are likely to move house frequently, on ways to modify the effects of school change.
14. A study into the long-term effects of transience on children.
15. A study of multiple teacher changes within the school year in schools with a high roll turnover.
16. An investigation into Government policies that are likely to facilitate stable housing for poor families.

This Paper is a brief synopsis of Anna Lee's Dissertation of the same name. The full study, including references to all literature and greater analysis of the survey, is available from the NZEI Te Riu Roa website (www.nzei.org.nz).

REFERENCE

- 1 The 1998 Annual Meeting of NZEI Te Riu Roa passed Recommendation 3 in order to negotiate support for transient children with the Ministry of Education and made the following points:
 - 2.9.1 Schools receiving students who have attended two other schools in the previous 12 months must assess those students as soon as possible. If the assessment shows significant gaps (as identified by the school) in the student's learning, the school may apply for an immediate grant of \$1,250, per term for a two term period. This level of funding would enable some 165 hours of teacher aide time to assist the student, or could be used for some appropriate support. There should be an independent research programme funded by the Ministry to establish the size of the problem to enable appropriate support.
 - 2.10.1 Recent research has suggested that many students with special needs have frequent changes of school. Of a small investigation into children at the margin of ORS, 50 percent of the final study moved to another school during the study of about six months. Schools receiving students who frequently changed schools need to be resourced immediately to cater for the needs of the student. These children are self-identifying and can therefore be easily targeted.
 - 2.10.2 The Ministry of Education must establish and maintain a database to track students (who may or may not have additional special needs) and a resource fund to enable schools to receive immediate assistance.
 - 2.10.3 It is difficult to estimate the cost for this proposal as no national records are kept on students who frequently change school.