



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

Frequent movement, schools and educational achievement

Summary of Phase One of the education module of the *Building Attachment in Families and Communities Affected by Transience and Residential Movement* project.¹

About the research programme

By international standards, people in New Zealand move a lot. While this can be good for communities, individuals and families, it can be a disadvantage when people are moving very frequently for negative reasons - such as inadequate housing, family violence or to escape debt.

While some research has been done on how high levels of mobility affect individuals and families, there is little on how communities are affected, or whether strong community infrastructures can help people develop a sense of belonging. The *Building Attachment* project aims to address these gaps through a series of inter-connected studies - one of which is looking at the educational issues raised in communities with high levels of mobility.

The education part of the wider *Building Attachment* project is being led by NZCER Chief Researcher Dr Jane Gilbert.

Are schools affected by mobility?

Schools play a vital role in any community's infrastructure. They are community resources and are often a focal point for local activities. While we might expect schools to be adversely affected in communities with high levels of mobility, they could play an important role in ameliorating some of high mobility's more negative effects. Finding out if this is the case is the aim of the project's education module.

¹ For more information on the wider *Building Attachment* project see <http://whypeoplemove.net.nz>

Frequent movement by children between schools, especially in the primary sector, is seen as a problem by many schools, and in some parts of New Zealand it is a major issue. International research shows that while high student mobility is linked with lower achievement in low-income areas, it is inconclusive on whether lower achievement is *caused* by moving frequently. We don't know how or why changing schools frequently affects educational achievement, if in fact it does, nor do we know exactly why frequent movement is such an issue for schools.

Parameters for the Phase One study

In Phase One of this project, 20 schools in four areas of New Zealand were studied - Kawerau and Opotiki (in the Bay of Plenty), Waitangirua/Cannons Creek (in Porirua City near Wellington), and Amuri (a rural area in North Canterbury). The principals of the 20 schools (primary, intermediate and secondary) were interviewed, and data was collected on student movement, achievement, and attendance.

Each of these four areas has overall mobility rates similar to those for New Zealand as a whole, however all of the schools were affected, in different ways, by high levels of student movement. How much, if at all, does this movement affect schools and students in these areas?

What we found

The average roll 'turnover'² rate for the 20 study schools was 33 percent. Several schools had rates as high as 45 percent, while at the other end of the scale others had turnover rates of between 9 and 12 percent. These rates are high by international standards, but given New Zealanders' high mobility levels, they are on a par with those for the country as a whole and comparable with other New Zealand schools with similar decile ratings.

The researchers looked at the progress cards³ of all students in Years 5, 8 and 11 in the study schools to see how many schools these students had attended. 20-25 percent of all students had attended two or more schools above the usual number for a child at that age - these students were classed as 'frequent movers'. Some children had been to 15 different schools, and one or two had been to many more.

² The term 'turnover' is used here to mean the entry and exit of students who were *not* new entrants or graduates.

³ 'Progress Cards' (also known as 'Record of Schools Attended' or E19/22A cards) are official records held for all students enrolled in a school.

In three of the four case study areas, most of the movement was between different schools in the same general area. It was clear that in many of the study schools the high turnover rates were produced by a small number of students who are moving *very* frequently, although often not very far. In Amuri, however, almost all movement was to or from different parts of New Zealand.

Mobility and achievement

We collected achievement information for all Year 5, 8 and 11 students at the study schools in order to compare the frequent movers' achievement with that of the other students. This was difficult as schools don't always collect the same types of information and, because most of this information isn't standardized, it is difficult to compare achievement across different schools. As we only had usable data from a small number of students, our results must be interpreted with a great deal of caution. That said, in most cases our comparisons showed only very small differences (in most cases, not statistically significant) in achievement between the frequent movers and the 'stable' group.

The main differences were in mathematics achievement at the primary level. In the secondary schools, frequent movers were slightly more likely to be taking 'alternative' or locally developed courses rather than traditional 'academic' courses. Absenteeism rates were slightly higher in the frequent mover group, especially in the secondary schools.

What the principals had to say

Most of the principals of the 20 study schools see frequent movement by students as a problem – for the students, for schools, and for the local communities. They told us that frequent movers had an impact in three main ways:

- they disrupt programmes and classroom routines;
- they increase a school's administrative costs; and
- they have a negative impact on a school's overall achievement profile.

For these principals, children who change schools frequently are an unwanted burden. In their view, these children take scarce resources away from the school's 'natural' cohort of students, they make it difficult for schools to carry out their 'core business', and they limit a schools' ability to evaluate their programmes effectively.

The principals said frequent movers are disadvantaged because it takes a while for them to settle in and adapt to new routines, and because their access to any special programmes (for example, reading recovery) is inevitably delayed while their needs are assessed and resources are arranged.

The principals also noted that there are often long waits for information from a child's previous school, and problems with the accuracy, completeness, and/or usefulness of this information when it does arrive. Several said that different funding models are needed if schools in high mobility areas were to be appropriately resourced. Others suggested that the Ministry of Education set up a national electronic database to monitor the movement and achievement of all New Zealand school children.⁴

Several principals mentioned the need for better communication between schools, and between schools and agencies such as Child, Youth & Family, Work & Income, and Social Workers in Schools.

The principals used a variety of terms to refer to children who change schools frequently (including 'transient', 'itinerant', 'high turnover', 'boomerang', 'turbulent') but 'transient' was the most common. In general they did not distinguish 'transients' from 'frequent movers' – most saw *all* frequent movement as problematic. It was common for transience and truancy to be used as synonyms, and some principals used the term 'transient' to talk about some of their more 'difficult' families (who may or may not have been frequent movers).

Many schools appear to have a variety of informal strategies for managing the impact of high mobility. Some have orientation programmes for new students - although it appears that very little information is collected on the effectiveness of these programmes.

Where to from here?

In Phase Two of this project we plan to look in more depth at some key issues raised by this preliminary study - including:

- why principals tend to regard frequent movers negatively;
- why it is difficult for schools to deal with frequent movers;

⁴ In April 2004 Cabinet approved funds for the development of a project – known as the Student Management System – that aims to support better data exchange and 'inter-operability' within and between schools, and between schools and other agencies (the Ministry of Education and NZQA for example). See the Ministry of Education's website for more details.

- whether policies and funding arrangements assume a stability that doesn't actually exist in practice ⁵;
- whether current funding arrangements disadvantage schools in high mobility areas;
- whether or not there are specific features of the way schools are organised (or the way teachers think) that make it hard for them to deal with children who move a lot.

In 2006 we plan to return to the 20 study schools to look at the attendance records and progress cards of all students in Years 8 and 11, and to use a new measure to compare the achievement of the frequent movers with that of the more 'stable' group. We will also be collecting roll information from the case study schools for four more years until the closure of the data collection phase of the project in 2008.

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⁵ Frequent movement appears to be a normal feature of New Zealand life. For example, the 1996 Census figures show that around half of the total population (60 percent of children aged between 5 and 9) had moved at least once in the previous five years. Moreover, movement (for schooling, work, between relatives and to fulfil family obligations) is a well-established pattern in all four of the case study areas.