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## Veteran Teachers' Perspectives on Student Mobility

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## **Veteran Teachers' Perspectives on Student Mobility**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share the results of a study that explored the perspective of teachers who teach in high transient elementary schools. Interviews were conducted with eleven veteran teachers who each had a minimum of 19 years teaching experience. All the teachers were teaching in the Rock Hill School District, which borders the western edge of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The interviews explored issues relating to mobility of the student body, the relationship between mobility and classroom environment, mobility and instructional adaptations, and parental support. The data reveals that three major themes emerged as significant throughout the veteran teachers' in-depth interviews. The issues of behavior and weak academic foundations were referred to consistently; yet, the most noted response was the loss of instructional time. These data suggest that these three themes are inter-related in that transient students with low skills are frequently viewed as behavioral problems who in turn take up teacher's attention, thus taking away instructional time from the entire class.

### Introduction

Today's teachers are being asked to do more than ever before. With students transferring at an alarming rate, teachers are pushed to acquaint themselves with their new pupils, screen for academic ability, diagnose for learning difficulties, and provide appropriate individualized instruction immediately before students head off to their next school. It has become an academic turnstile of sort. Students are rarely staying in one place long enough to obtain the specific services they need before packing up and moving on. Yet, oddly enough, student mobility and its relationships to learning and instruction are rarely discussed in research, even though mobility is profoundly tied to the fabric of American life.

The U.S. has one of the highest mobility rates of developed countries; annually about twenty percent of all Americans move. When compared to their peers in several western countries and Japan, American children have one of the highest mobility rates (Fenwick, Smith & Blackman, 2000). A 1994 General Accounting Office (GAO) report on elementary school children indicates that approximately seventeen percent of the nation's third-graders (more than 500,000 children) have attended at least three different schools since starting first grade (Kebrow, 1996).

In large cities across the country such as Atlanta, Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles, schools struggle with student mobility rates of seventy, eighty, and ninety percent (Kebrow, 1996). Plus, it is not unheard of for a child to change schools six or

seven times in a single year (Stover, 2000). Suburban schools near these urban centers have mobility rates that climb up to forty or fifty percent, which is certainly substantial.

A survey conducted by The Principals' Center of state department of education research and assessment officials revealed that few state departments of education even report student mobility rates. The U.S Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) last reported on the phenomenon back in 1995. School districts typically report some form of student mobility rate, nonetheless, Kebrow believes its pervasiveness is difficult to assess "because equations are based on varying formulae and timetables" (1996, p. 1).

Transfer students who change schools during the course of the academic school year are a perennial concern for many teachers. Students who transfer into schools during the academic year carry with them a tremendous amount of stress. These youngsters not only deal with the change of environment in their home lives, a change that can be similar to death and mourning for some (Neuman, 1988); they also encounter a change in schools, which is almost certain to create some disjuncture in their learning experience (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989; Kerbow, 1995b). Jalongo states that relocation is stressful on children and that facilitating children's adjustment to moving is "a critical dimension of parenting and care giving in our mobile society" (1985, p. 57).

A modest body of empirical data on student mobility has been under development for many years, but only recently has the phenomenon started to receive national attention (Mao et al., 1997). While there is extensive literature dealing with the psychological and social adjustment problems of highly transient students (Allan & Beardsley, 1983; Ingersoll et al. 1989; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990), research to address the overall impact of student mobility on instructional continuity has been lacking. Yet, one of the major impact areas of student mobility is on the continuity of instructional programs and its resulting impact on both school site and individual academic attainment. Bruno and Isken (1996) claim that:

Any disruption in the continuity of instructional programs can have a major impact on future academic attainment...what is not reported and lacking in the research data is the negative effect student transiency has on the non-mobile, or stable students, and the overall assessment of school growth (p. 14)

Some of the first educational researchers to identify the association between highly mobile student populations in an urban school setting and academic achievement were Levine, Wesolowski, and Corbett (1966). By looking at students' grades, they found the number of "moves" the children made were strongly associated with grades. Another large study examining the magnitude of student mobility was conducted in Texas public schools. Mao et al. (1997) concluded that there are

...significant relationships between student mobility, academic performance and school accountability. Mobile students scored lower on the state-required

test than student's who did not move. This negative relationship became even stronger in schools with higher student turnover rates or percentages of economically disadvantaged students (p. 19)

Overall, there is little doubt among school officials that excessive student transiency can severely impede modern school reform and restructuring efforts. Yet, even though the problem of high student transiency is largely an urban school problem, issues of instructional continuity that are associated with high student transiency are growing for both urban and suburban schools.

Statistics show that mobile children, regardless of family income, are more likely to be below grade level in English and math and more likely to repeat a grade than those children who never move (General Accounting Office, 1994). Kerbow's Chicago Research (1996) found that children who move a single time might lag behind for the year they move, but rebound the following year. Students who move frequently do not have the time or the stability to rebound. Those who have changed schools four times or more are a full year behind their stable peers by the time they reach grade six (Kerbow, 1996).

Mao et al. (1997) believes that at the individual level, being mobile can have negative consequences on a child's individual academic attainment and progress, and that high student mobility generally has negative impacts on schools, districts, and social programs. The GAO (1994) believes achievement scores are only part of the problem. Mobile students are more likely to repeat a grade than those who have never changed schools. Ludon (1986) and Brown (1996) state that students who attended the same school for their whole academic career are most likely to graduate; whereas the most mobile of student populations has the highest rate of school failure and dropout. To make the situation even more discouraging, Kerbow (1996) found that mobility hurts the achievement not only of the students who move, but also that of the stable students at highly mobile schools.

Teachers who have fluctuating class enrollment lists must, out of necessity, review material frequently and, reviewing carries a heavy cost. A revolving door of new students forces teachers to devote attention to remedial work as well, rather than new lessons (Stover, 2000). Vail (1996) believes that students who have been in the same classroom all year do not learn as much new material. Kerbow (1996) says, students in mobile schools, even those students who do not move frequently, are "getting instruction and content that is approximately a year behind that of students in more stable schools" (p. 16).

Another source of lost time is that of behavioral problems which plague teachers in classrooms with high mobility (Kebrow, 1996; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). Teachers take time to set rules and procedures for children at the beginning of the year, but for each new child that comes into the classroom after the year has begun; the teacher must reestablish the 'behavioral norms.' Kerbow (1996) believes the high turnover rate robs teachers of psychological rewards. Teachers spend a great

deal of time getting to know their students and understanding their learning styles, but just when they begin to see success with a child, the child moves away.

Overall, a comprehensive body of research details the emerging problems a mobile student body can have on teaching and learning. But, what about the teachers that grapple with a mobile classroom? What are their personal thoughts and perspectives on this increasingly significant educational dilemma?

### Focus of the Study

In the present study I expanded on recent research by examining perceptions of veteran teachers regarding transient students and their instructional needs. Included is information centering on multiple mobility issues, such as: the relationship between mobility and classroom environment, mobility and instructional adaptations, mobility and parental support.

This study was part of a larger project that investigated student mobility in one suburban-urban school district outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The project specifically researched academic attainment of stable and mobile students and disentangled data from one standardized assessment test. Eleven different strands of data were collected from students, teachers, parents, and the community. Selecting a representative sample of veteran teachers from the large project provided an opportunity to obtain detailed descriptions of the teacher's perspectives and a greater understanding of what instructional adaptations are needed to instruct a highly mobile student population.

### Method

#### Participants

The participants were eleven seasoned, veteran teachers with a minimum of at least nineteen years teaching in the district. These teachers were specifically interviewed because of the length of time they have been teaching, and because they have all taught on the eastern-side of the Rock Hill School District. The eastern-side of the township has been viewed as "more transient" than the rest of the township; a phenomenon that many people believe has been steadily increasing. All eleven teachers interviewed have spent a considerable amount of time teaching in these schools. Because of the number of years of service they have provided, they were viewed as a constant in a fluctuating community and were interviewed to share their insights on a multitude of topics.

#### Survey Design & Data Analysis

An interview framework, intending to be conducted in a conversational form, was designed to help structure the interviews in spring 1999. Based on information informally gathered from other teachers in the district through lengthy conversations, from reviewing the current educational literature on transiency and mobility, and from

my own questions that had emerged, interview topics were grouped into four overall categories.

The format of the interview varied from general information such as: how many students are in your class this year? to more open-ended question like: How could you more effectively service your students and meet all their educational needs? The four categories that made up the interview framework were: general information, instructional adaptations, transiency/mobility issues, and parental support. Under each of the categories multiple questions were asked to provide the researcher with a clear understanding of the interviewees thoughts and perspectives on the topic.

Responses to the general information category were designed to provide an overall view of the teacher's current class. On many occasions teachers were also asked to provide this information on different classes they have had in the past. These simple, yet informative questions helped to "break the ice" so to speak and direct the interview towards the right direction. Thus, using these types of right or wrong questions and gathering numerical data helped to put the interviewees at ease.

Responses to the second category of questions were designed to focus on teachers' instructional adaptations. Participants were asked to describe what instructional adaptations were being made for their students and how class size might affect adaptations. Participants were also asked questions referring to instructional adaptations and students' diverse needs and the role of the Instructional Support Team (IST) process.

The next category focused on student transiency. Participants responded to questions pertaining to the relationship between transiency and the classroom environment, learning abilities, new students, and stable students. Responses to these questions were designed to reveal information about the role of transiency in the elementary classroom.

The last category focused on the intersection of parental support and transiency. Participants were asked if levels of parent participation differ from stable families and highly mobile families. These responses were designed to gain an awareness of the level of family participation in elementary schools as viewed through the lens of the classroom teacher.

In April of 1999, a letter was distributed to these teachers explaining the goals of this study and inviting them to participate. Throughout the next year all eleven educators were interviewed at their respective school sites. Each interview was conducted in private in the teacher's classroom. Interviews were held before and after the school day, and on occasion during the teacher's preparation period. Interviews lasted between twenty to seventy minutes and although a general guideline was used to direct the interviews, at times participants elaborated on a certain topic and spend a great deal of time answering questions from one category as opposed to the other categories.

All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed at a later date. Next, they were read multiple times, color coded with highlighters and tabs, and lastly electronically indexed. The interviews were conducted with multiple participants to determine if any trends or patterns surfaced from their shared thoughts. As I collected data I tried to convey an attitude of acceptance (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) and structured the interviews to resemble "a conversation with a purpose" (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, p.149). In a non-direct manner, I intently listened to each informant as they shared their thoughts in relation to academic adaptations and transiency. Overall, three themes emerged as significant from the participants' spoken words.

## Results

Analysis of the data suggests that teachers clearly emphasized three categorical themes as critical for teaching transient populations. These central themes emerged as significant and can be viewed as inter-related. The issues of student behavior, academic foundations, and instructional time were repetitively provided throughout teachers' verbal responses.

### Behavior

Transient students' behavior was a major theme that emerged from the teacher interviews. Teachers spoke of the transient students' unsettled back grounds and how uprooting students multiple times can make it harder for students to assimilate smoothly into an already functioning classroom environment. Teachers freely commented on how the classroom environment had been altered with the influx of new students arriving throughout the year. The veterans specifically spoke of behavioral concerns that can shift the climate and tone of the classroom. Issues of students' negative attitudes and physical fighting were referred to as newcomers assimilate into classrooms that have already gotten underway. Students' adjustments to the new classroom were spoken of frequently as a concern to many teachers.

"The kids that are coming in, come in with a real attitude. Kind of fight attitude" (Teacher 4). "Now sometimes the behavior is affected by transiency. Children that have been in and out in a number of different schools for whatever reason, this is how they make their presence felt in the classroom and they feel unstable" (Teacher 1). Their behavior is not good and they are transient children" (Teacher 9). "It creates an anxiety level too if the child doesn't know tomorrow if I am going to be at a new school, or am I out of here in a couple of months. If it is a situation like that, they could develop an attitude" (Teacher 8). "Generally these are kids who are very... they test the system here, frequently. Meaning, they will go out of their way to see what they can get away with. And they are really out to prove themselves. The teachers' limits and the classes limits and the schools' limits and the administration" (Teacher 4).

The teachers also commented on the general disruption that occurs in their rooms when newcomers enter. "Just in terms of when you think you are settled in, and you've got everyone with the correct materials and enough of everything, someone goes and someone else comes in and the disruption starts" (Teacher 11). "It's a very transient

population and it does effect the classroom environment, because if everything is going smoothly and then all of a sudden here comes a couple of new students that have to learn the whole entire thing. It is just so disruptive in trying to get them to where you'd like them to be, or even what experiences they have had with the other schools. It always seems like the newcomers have a behavioral issue that follows them" (Teacher 10).

Frequently, teachers voiced their discontent with students moving and then picking up and transferring out of the building a short time later. "I believe many discipline problems stem from their belief that it doesn't matter how they act, because they are moving anyway" (Teacher 1). "It appears that children who have moved from school to school multiple times are less willing to invest time and effort in becoming a model Rock Hill citizen (behaviorally), perhaps because they feel that this is a temporary placement" (Teacher 5).

While teachers commented on how they see transient students as disruptive and at times behaviorally inappropriate, some comments even considered the affect behavior has on the stable students. "Sometimes they (the transient pupils) have a hard time becoming one of the group and it takes its toll on the stable students over time" (Teacher 2). "The major behavior problems in my class are all new children this year. It is affecting the stable population" (Teacher 7).

Many of these remarks support the research of Kebrow (1996) and Wood et al. (1993) who found that behavioral issues are many times a symptom of high mobility. Additionally, research has been conducted which examined the effects of mobility on adjustment. Morris, Pestaner, & Nelson (1967) speculate that long-term adjustment may be affected by high mobility. In support of this idea, Shaller (1974) found that children moving two or more times reported increased difficulties in relating to peers, as compared to those students who had moved fewer times. The Rock Hill School District instructs many students who have made multiple moves while still within their elementary years; this movement may impede students' assimilation into their new classrooms.

#### Academic Foundations

The next major theme that surfaced centered on the transient students' poor academic foundations. Many teachers commented that their transient newcomers not only have an unsteady foundation and weak basic skills, but other problems such as educational gaps in learning and the continuity of instruction they have received are brought into question. Additionally, concerns focusing on the transient students' misplaced or non-existent school records and issues in regards to proper academic placements plaguing mobile students are highlighted.

Teachers are concerned about the academic histories that their new mobile students are bringing with them, in regards to their academic levels, school behaviors, and personal issues which all impact on students' academics. Many comments were made expressing concern for where the students have previously been instructed and



what they have already learned. “We can only hope that the instruction s/he has received is comparable to what we provide. Unfortunately, students coming from the city public schools do not come with the same learning experiences” (Teacher 3). “We assume that we can begin at a certain level, when in reality the new student may not be ready for it” (Teacher 1). “Central to the instructional design is acquisition and practice of new skills based on successful acquisition of previously learned and practiced material. Students missing steps in the sequence are at a disadvantage” (Teacher 5).

Teachers think that most students are transferring from the city to Rock Hill, and then leaving Rock Hill and heading westward. Many spoke of the so-called “revolving door syndrome” and the significant changes their rosters endure. “I have lost over half of the list that I was given (50%) at the beginning of the summer than when I started in September, so half of them were brand new” (Teacher 11).

“Boomerang students” were also mentioned repetitively by the veteran teachers. These students are defined as pupils who transfer out of a particular school only to return again in the future. Teachers provided concrete examples of what happens to individual students within their classrooms who have moved frequently. “This year I had one (student) start in September, she left in December, then came back in January. So that was hard for her. It was a lot of changes for her to make in December and start at a new school, and then the kids had said their good-byes and then she was back again. But then she had also had a gap, because for example, we had learned new things in math that she didn’t know how to do them. So it was hard for her. And she doesn’t have issues of another language or whatever, so relatively speaking it was easier, but it was still hard for her” (Teacher 11).

The teachers in Rock Hill want to integrate new students quickly and allow them to function equally with classmates in all areas of classroom life. But, this can be challenging since some students have moved so frequently in a short period of time. “Some of these kids...usually it’s not just one move, it’s in and out, in and out. Last year I had one child, this was his fourth school in two years, and then he left me and went somewhere else, so that was his fifth school and first grade was not even half way through, and there is no way that you don’t have learning gaps” (Teacher 11).

This issue of transiency and students’ academic foundations is of great importance in the Rock Hill District because teachers who work with mobile students have the challenge of quickly integrating newcomers into established classes so instructional time is not lost and gaps in learning do not occur. New students need to become part of a class that has already built a history, including a sense of purpose, a common understanding of the rules and routines that govern activities, and a shared knowledge base acquired from previous instruction and required for subsequent learning. The challenge at Rock Hill is complicated because new students bring educational histories and a knowledge of subject matter that do not always match the shared experiences of the classes they enter which supports the findings of Lash & Kirkpatrick (1990). Moreover, integrating new students needs to be accomplished in ways that maintain continuity in learning for both the newcomers and the class.

One teacher commented on how the existing curriculum makes it difficult for newcomers to assimilate. "In our district we have a curriculum that is designed to build year upon year, which sounds good at the time, but when you are not here for the beginning, to come in at the end of it...it's really hard" (Teacher 1). This idea supports the conclusions of Benson, Haycraft, Steyart, & Weigel (1979) who speculate that a possible reason that mobility has an affect on a child's adjustment is that a mobile child needs to constantly adjust to different teaching methodologies in the different schools. Such adjustments also require that students deal with new teacher expectations, new textbooks, and a new physical environment. All this newness may be difficult for students to handle, even though the curriculum is set up so as to build upon concepts year after year.

Many comments were revealed throughout the collected data centering on the issues of learning gaps, continuity of instruction, and placement. "So many of the transfer students seem to have gaps in their learning. They often lack the background information that the other students have and have been building on during their primary years" (Teacher 6). "I feel that it is hard to make sure that we have brought their reading levels up to grade level when we only have them for a school year or less" (Teacher 8). "My main concern is that these kids don't have much continuity in their academic lives" (Teacher 2). "Gaps in background experiences and no continuity of reading and math programs for the new students" (Teacher 4). "When we get new kids, well, when we test them when they first come in, they don't shoot to the top groups. They filter right to the bottom" (Teacher 1).

As the General Accounting Office (1994) statistics show, mobile children are more likely to be below grade level in major subject areas. These comments echo the research stating that students who frequently change schools are more likely to experience academic problems and/or delays. Likewise, transient students suffer more gaps in knowledge than their more stable classmates do (Benson et al., 1979; Calabrese, 1989; Ellickson, Bianca & Schoeff, 1988; General Accounting Office, 1994; Ingersoll et al. 1989; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990).

Additionally, teacher excerpts centering on lack of past records and data on highly transient students were plentiful. "The major difficulty is that it's difficult to build on the Main Street experience when a student is new. When a new student comes and there is no meaningful history attached to their records, we start at the very beginning as they do" (Teacher 1). "We don't receive school records, or it takes a very long time to get the school records" (Teacher 8). "Those students who come in, they may stay with me for the year, but if you look over their past records they tend to have been in one school for kindergarten, and another school for first, and another school for second grade. How can you learn when you move so much?" (Teacher 2).

These comments echo the findings of Vail (1996) and Kebrow (1996) and often cause teachers to take extra time to thoroughly evaluate students who enter their rooms as "blank slates" with no written history attached since knowledge of student's prior

education is lost in the paperwork shuffle. The end result is lost instructional time, extra work, and frustrated educators.

Overall, information gleaned from these interviews shows teachers believe the majority of the newcomers transferring into the Rock Hill School District are doing so with low basic skills and weak academic foundations. Gaps in knowledge are prevalent and are problematic to the mobile youngsters and their new teachers alike.

## Time

The topic of time is the most prevalent theme to emerge during the data analysis, and is intricately entwined and strongly connected to the other two major themes in this study. The issue of time appeared in a variety of ways, most notably in relation to:

- the loss of instructional time from reviewing because of gaps in learning
- the lack of time and increasing teacher frustration
- the lack of instructional time
- behavior/routine

A multitude of responses referred to the loss of instructional time and related to frequent reviewing because of gaps in learning and unstable academic foundations. Faculty members recalled difficulties they have had teaching a steady curriculum at a steady pace. Mobile students' gaps in knowledge were referred to frequently, which support the findings of Stover (2000) who believes teachers of transient populations must devote attention to reviewing frequently. "We have to stop our learning, go back and attempt to fill in wide gaps in the new students' knowledge. Most times they never truly catch up" (Teacher 9). "Trying to fill in the knowledge gaps (background knowledge) can slow the pace of instruction" (Teacher 8).

As teachers wrote extensively of their timing dilemmas, feelings of frustration emerged through their remarks. "Stopping instruction takes away from continuity. It is hard to 'keep the flow' with large numbers, adding transfers always takes time" (Teacher 2). "Mostly it is the repetition of rules, regulation, class procedures which takes away from instruction time" (Teacher 4).

Teachers stated that making instructional adaptations for their diverse classes takes time and screening newcomers who have no prior records attached also takes time. "Academic transiency affects the class because you have to stop and bring the transient child up to date as best you can, and then continue until it happens again" (Teacher 9).

Another major concern due to transiency was that of the relationship between time, behavior, and classroom routine. A multitude of statements commented on how the influx of newcomers affected the routine of the classroom and took time away from the other students. "I'm noticing that my transfer students have problems following classroom and school rules. While I expect they will need a certain amount of time to adjust, some of them never really catch on" (Teacher 6). "More and more of my attention

is spent helping these transient students catch up, follow our rules, and learn our routine. It is taking too much time away from the majority of the class" (Teacher 7). "A new student coming in usually upsets the other students' structure and routine" (Teacher 9).

These responses correlate with Mao et al. (1997) who believe being mobile not only can have negative consequences on a child's individual academic attainment and progress, but more importantly, high student mobility can have negative impacts on entire schools and districts, as well. Lost time due to behavioral problems that plague Rock Hill educators matches the current research of Wood et al. (1993). In addition, these teacher comments correlate with the thoughts of Kebrow (1996) who has documented that teachers are robbed of "psychological rewards" because of the high turnover rate of transient pupils. With highly transient students, as soon as Rock Hill teachers embrace them, get them settled and into a routine, they leave. Teacher frustration is the result.

As the data analysis proceeded, the time factor continued to surface as teachers feel they need to review material frequently for newcomers, a practice that takes learning time away from others. Teachers repetitively used phrases such as "stop our learning", "slow the pace of instruction", and "play catch up." In numerous ways, many teachers voiced the same concern: adding transient students takes time away from learning for all.

Because of the diverse backgrounds of the students, and the nature of their frequent moves, teachers are concerned with what the students have learned prior to their arrival into their classrooms. In keeping with the theme of time, one teacher eloquently explained why she must spend a large part of instructional time strengthening her students' background knowledge:

We spend a great part of our day in giving the children background experiences that they do not receive at home, so that takes up a lot of time. You can't assume anything. You can't assume that they know some of the background for the stories because they just don't have the experiences. You talk about the beach for example, and they've never been there. This alone eats up a valuable amount of instructional time in the classroom (Teacher 1).

Overall, the issue of time is an important factor that surfaced repetitively throughout the data. Transient students are viewed as taking away time from learning and disrupting the flow or routine of the classroom. Instructional timing is altered when newcomers are assimilated into the existing classroom. These three categorical findings of behavior, academic foundations, and time are viewed as all entwining and interrelating. At times it was difficult to place excerpts and ideas into just one category, for much overlap exists.

### An Interconnected Theme Emerges

Overall, the interviews provided a variety of different answers. Yet, through the analysis of the responses, three themes emerged as significant and intertwining: the issues of time, behavior, and a weak academic foundation were central to teacher's answers.

The issue of time appeared when asking about the influx of newcomers. Data reveals that teachers believe that too much time is needed to assimilate the youngsters to their new surroundings thus it is impeding on the continuity of instruction. In addition, teachers feel stable students are being negatively affected by losing precious, learning time.

The issue of behavior surfaced continually when teachers were asked about new students. The majority of teachers revealed that transient pupils have a hard time assimilating and may act out or not conform to the stated school rules. Additionally, this type of behavior affects the continuity of instruction when teachers need to stop lessons to direct students back on task, thus inhibiting stable student's learning, as well as their own.

Lastly, a common thread that was woven through the collected responses centered on low academic levels of mobile students. Teachers consistently referred to mobile students as lacking or behind in their level of studies, and wrote openly about catching them up to the rest of the class. One teacher related the issues of behavior and loss of instructional time together. "The transiency affects the behavior of the school more. It's been harder and harder I think for the kids who see these other kids coming because there are more and more transients coming in and the time it is taking...it's taking away a lot of time from actual academic instruction." (Teacher 5) That observation supports the findings of Kebrow (1996) and NEA Today (1998) who believe a source of lost instructional time are behavioral problems that plague teachers in classrooms with high mobility. In addition, teachers who have fluctuating class enrollment lists review material frequently, which is costly in terms of time and curricular coverage (Vail, 1996).

One elementary school generated a list of students who were chronic behavior offenders and were frequently sent to the office. One teacher commented on the list during her interview. "As we were going through it (the list) we noticed some of the kids got suspended with a lot of time outs and detentions. We were saying look at this list. The majority of these kids are new kids. When the principal has to sit and talk to the whole fifth grade time and time again, it's the good kids that have to listen to it, they have been here. But it is the new kids that are causing the problems" (Teacher 1). This is another prime example of newcomers pulling instructional time away from the entire class.

Some teachers seemed to have thought about the loss of instructional time before, while others were thinking about the timing factor for the first time. "I run over constantly to make sure they are on target, making sure they are doing what they are supposed to. I guess it does eat up instruction time, I never really thought of it, we are just so used to doing it. I guess it does slow us down" (Teacher 4). That comment mirrors the beliefs of Fenwick et al. (2000) who believe instruction in highly mobile schools tends to be less innovative, slower, and repetitive. The repetition in Rock Hill classrooms may be slowing down the learning of all the students.

One comment that synthesized the issues of academics, behavior, parental support, and time together in working with transient students was:

It is time-consuming learning from the student what they know. What their background is about. All parts of the person, I mean their family, their history, strengths and weaknesses. And this may be stereotypical, but what we are getting, it seems like into Rock Hill are kids with a poor family structure. Weak academics and at times violent and disruptive and disrespectful and that all takes so much time away from the others, and you don't get enough...you don't get everything done and that hurts everyone" (Teacher 8).

This feeling echoes the findings of Nelson, Simoni & Adelman (1996) who suggest that poor school functioning and mobility may both be related to a third factor, at-risk family traits.

Overall, many teacher excerpts were used to document the three themes that emerged from the data and show their interconnectedness. While it is difficult and messy to separate data, many times it does not fall neatly into one category, but instead can crossover in multiple categories as a way to contextualize and add richness to the data. "The identification of connections between categories and themes can be seen as a contextualizing step in analysis" (Dey, 1993 p. 5).

### Recommendations

Within this article three major themes emerged as significant throughout the veteran teachers' in-depth interviews. The issues of behavior and low academic skills were repetitively referred to, yet, the most noted response, or complaint, was the loss of instructional time. These three themes are all inter-related in that transient students with low skills are frequently viewed as behavioral problems who in turn take up teacher's attention, thus taking away instructional time from the entire class.

Since many research studies are documenting the alarming amount of movement in America today, schools can plan on grappling with transient students as the year's progress. As can be seen from this study, teachers are becoming frustrated with the lack of stability and are in need of an organized program or system to combat the mobility at the building or district level. Support is needed to help teachers who are striving to create some classroom stability in a sea of movement.

I propose that in an attempt to assist teachers in the "mobility war" the Rock Hill School District begin to listen to their teachers' thoughts and perceptions. Just as this study has begun to dig at a societal issue that is affecting teaching and learning, all districts across the country, both urban and suburban, should start a discussion with classroom teachers to further understanding. After teachers have had the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns options should be put in place to support all students, both transient and stable, and also support classroom teachers

Given the findings of this study and many similar research studies, several policy implications that may either reduce the level of mobility or mediate its potentially negative impact on students and schools are feasible and definitely worthy of further systemic consideration. For these recommendations to be effectively implemented to produce change would take the efforts of the entire Rock Hill School District

First, a district-wide public awareness campaign targeting parents should be developed to explain to parents the impact of repeated moves on a child's education. The goal would be to convince parents to avoid unnecessary student transfers and to inform parents of the current research documenting the relationship between high mobility and lower test scores. Brochures could be created explaining what class records need to be taken to a new school to ease an unavoidable transfer and offer advice to teachers explaining how to make the transition to a new school easier on a child. Hopefully, educating parents about the dangers of student mobility will lessen the amount of student transfers.

Second, similar to the Chicago Public School District and the school system in Victoria, Texas, (Stover, 2000), Rock Hill could enact a district policy that allows a child who moves within the district to stay in his or her original school for the remainder of the academic school year. This would severely limit the amount of intra-district movement.

Third, efforts to reduce mobility can be coordinated with efforts to help schools counter its potentially negative effect. Since a portion of students are moving within the Rock Hill School District, the district could facilitate the flow of information available on transferring students so that schools can more accurately place them and determine their individual needs as they enter their new school. Information could easily be sent via the inter-school mail system or by the district-wide email system. In addition, if the district is able to identify clusters of elementary schools that exchange students; the schools involved could further explore collaboration. Information about transportation could be locally shared, and critical instructional information could be shared directly between teachers across schools. This close collaboration could help ease the student into his/her new environment while simultaneously supporting the new teacher as to the most effective modes of instruction to use with the student.

Fourth, extended learning opportunities could be made available for new transfers who are functioning below grade level. Additional literacy activities could be offered both before and after school, and possibly on Saturday mornings, for newcomers who are in need of extra learning time. Since this study has highlighted the ever-pressing problem of "lack of time," extending opportunities beyond the traditional school day would be a creative and effective means to further literacy experiences. Teachers, parental volunteers, or students from local universities could provide opportunities for students to expand their reading and writing skills by furnishing a wide variety of literature books and providing small group or one-on-one individualized instruction. This could serve as the optimal time to extend a student's learning, work on a particular weakness or gap in the students learning and address it through tutoring support that occurs parallel to basic classroom instruction.

Lastly, it could be propose that the Rock Hill School District hire new employees as transitional specialists to assist with high mobility issues. Since money for resources in schools is tight, I recommend writing a proposal for federal or state special project funding, or for outside corporate funding. The functions of the transitional specialists would include, but not be limited to the following responsibilities:

- Help new transfer families register with the necessary paperwork upon the student(s) arrival at school.
- Bring parents and new students on a tour of the facilities to assist with their assimilation hand help them feel welcomed in their new environment.
- Be a faculty contact for parents by being accessible both in person and through the telephone and email.
- Conduct welcome workshops for newcomers to learn the school rules, routines, desired behaviors and have an opportunity to meet fellow newcomers, as well.
- Conduct monthly grade level screenings to help detect gaps in background knowledge. This critical information could then be relayed to the classroom teacher and parents in a timely fashion. The transitional specialist could then be responsible for gathering ideas, learning packets and activities for parents to work on with their children at home, plus offer tutorial classes during the week to small groups of students who have similar weaknesses or gaps.
- Make weekly and/or monthly contact with new parents in regards to school functions, i.e. conferences, Home & School meetings, parent or district workshops, etc. Contact could be made via the telephone, through newsletters, or occasionally through home visits.
- Conduct monthly "New Parent" workshops so as to build a support system so parents can take ownership of or begin to feel invested in their child's new school and the surrounding community.

These recommendations may assist the Rock Hill School District in effectively working with their transient population. Only through a well thought out and strongly supported plan of action will any reform efforts be fruitful.

### Future Research

Educating an increasingly diverse and mobile population presents a host of challenges to schools. On a practical level, it demands that we devise a more effective way of tracking children and their families, of quickly assessing youngsters and making wise decisions about ways to meet their needs, of communicating with families regarding how they can support learning, and of preparing teachers to deal with highly diverse and ever-changing groups of students. On a more fundamental level, transient students ask us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about the world in which we work. In some schools, the reality is that students move frequently. Perhaps we need to figure this reality into our structural and pedagogical reform efforts and expand our knowledge base in reference to this dilemma by conducting more research in this field.



Future research needs to examine a host of issues and questions raised by this study. Ideas for future research include: 1) to further examine the instructional practices of classroom teachers who teach highly mobile students within a diverse community; 2) to examine programs and practices in schools where mobile students are performing better than expected; 3) to examine the relationship between mobile students who transfer over the summer months and student achievement, and those who transfer during the school year and student achievement; 4) to examine the differences between intra-transfer students and out-of-district transfer students and their level of academic attainment; and 5) to examine the relationship between standardized testing and teacher turnover rate.

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