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Addressing the needs of transient students: a collaborative approach to enhance teaching and learning in an area school

The research literature describes transient students as having difficulties making friends and socially integrating into their school, as being vulnerable to bullying, and as being academically and behaviourally at risk (Kariuki & Nash, 1999; Lee, 2001; Sanderson, 2003; Schafft, 2003). Significant gaps in students' knowledge and poor prior records of their learning also place a strain on teachers who do not always have the time needed to adequately assess student achievement and engage them in the curriculum (Sanderson, 2003). The literature also refers to schools being financially and pedagogically stretched to meet the often high needs of its most mobile students (Sanderson, 2003; Schafft, 2003; Walls, 2003). However, Henderson (2001) noted that transience has been viewed negatively in the research literature and in schools, with blame being cast towards the students themselves and their families. She suggested that this focus has detracted from an educational priority to improve teaching and learning.

This project looked at transient students and their families in a small rural area school (Years 1–13) in Wooldon. The difficulties faced by transient students were highlighted as being of particular concern at Wooldon School.¹ For this project, a “community of practice” was established in the school by the principal and deputy principal to collaboratively and, with the researchers, reflexively explore issues relating to teaching and learning for transient students.

¹ All names have been changed and identifying features have been removed from this report.

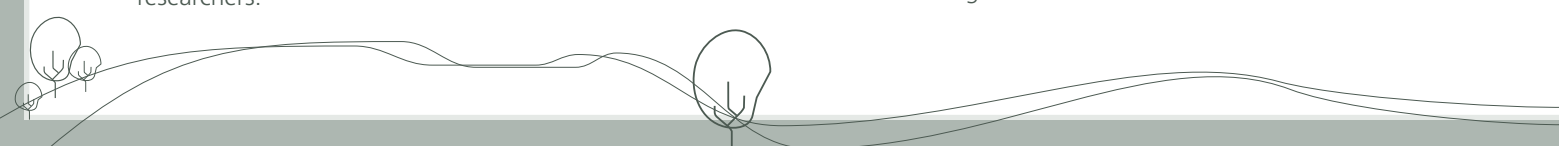
Aims and objectives

This project aimed to understand the school experiences of transient students and their relationships with teachers, their school achievement, and their social experiences. The project aimed to co-construct teacher knowledge about teaching and learning through action research (Mills, 2003) and a community of practice (Buysee, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003) to enhance teaching practices that challenge barriers and support student learning. The community of practice comprised the principal, deputy principal, four teachers, and two researchers.

Research questions

Teachers and researchers collaborated to develop the following questions to guide the project, and these questions reflect the aims and objectives of the project:

1. How does a community of practice and action research:
 - enhance teachers' understanding of transient students' learning and social experiences?
 - contribute to changes in teachers' assumptions and beliefs about classroom practices and student learning?





2. How does a community of practice involving researchers and teachers:
 - develop and sustain itself?
 - with action research, contribute to the co-construction of knowledge about teaching and learning?
3. How does a community of practice:
 - develop and evaluate teaching initiatives to improve student learning and social experiences?
 - identify what specific school initiatives contribute to improve student learning and social experiences?

Research design and methodology

A qualitative case-study approach was used to highlight the voices of transient students and their families so that teachers could reflect on their experiences. It also provided an opportunity to learn in detail about transient students' lived experiences in school, and to qualitatively study school protocol and teaching in the community of practice's action-research project. Participants included the community of practice members at Wooldon School and six transient families, with a total of 13 students.

The data comprised: archival document analysis (including students' work samples and assessment data), field notes (observations and recorded conversations between the teachers, researchers, and students over a period of one school year); and transcripts of the researchers' interviews with transient students, their parents, and teachers (before and at the end of the research). The data were analysed through a process of collaborative analysis and co-construction between the researchers and within the community of practice as the project proceeded.

Findings

The beginning and end-of-year interviews, community of practice discussions, and meetings formed the data set for this section. The data have been analysed according to the original objectives and research questions. These are informed by the themes of the lived experience of transience of students and families in the study. A detailed description of these themes can be found in the full report of this study.

The lived experience of transient students

Six themes about the lived experience of transient students were identified in the data:

- Rural mobility was linked to a better life.
- Mobility can be a consequence of negative school experiences.
- Students say that good teachers explain things, are friendly, are fun, and are not grumpy.
- Transient students are at risk academically.

- Transient students have difficulty making friends, are bullied, and are "at risk" of becoming "an outcast".
- Rural communities are "way too small" and have unique challenges in regards to "difference".

Enhancing teachers' understanding of transient students' learning and social experiences

Positive and productive changes took place for some teachers in the study who became more understanding and knowledgeable about transient students' experiences at school.

Some teachers reported that this project helped them to understand transient students' lived experiences at school and the implications for teaching and learning. They described feeling more sympathetic and responsive towards transient students. One teacher noted that the community of practice experience had highlighted students' experiences and perspectives for him. Another teacher described becoming more aware of how teachers can exclude transient students. She described the need to view these students in positive ways and as having strengths to which all teachers can respond. This implies the need for teachers to collaborate with each other in a focused manner.

It was also noted that teachers needed to maintain their awareness of students' experiences and perspectives, and collaborate with other teachers and families about transient students to ensure that everyone is kept up to date with students' circumstances and subsequent teaching and learning initiatives.

Changing teachers' assumptions and beliefs about classroom practices

Self-reflection in the community of practice about the lived experiences of transient students (as conveyed through the research literature and interview data from the study) was the foundation for decisions about improving teaching and learning initiatives for transient students in this study. This was not always a comfortable process as it involved: significant amounts of time; challenging current belief systems about transient students; and encouraging a positive, self-reflective, and responsive educational approach.

While most teachers did describe changing their attitude towards transient students, this did not always translate into specific and sustained changes in classroom-based teaching approaches. Teachers felt that the school had made some positive changes, and the principal described a need for continued investment of time and effort. One teacher said that maintaining close relationships with families was important. Another teacher described specifically changing his approach with one transient student by developing a positive relationship based on the student's interest in soccer.



In terms of implementing whole-school change, the principal felt that the project had highlighted the need for focused and concerted effort, but he noted that teachers could become disillusioned because they did not always see the rewards for their work. Teachers could be challenged by transient students' behaviour, and the principal felt it was important to support teachers to see past the behaviour and prioritise students' learning needs.

Developing and sustaining a community of practice

The community of practice began this project with a number of meetings in which the lived experiences and educational issues of transient students were discussed and researched in the literature. These meetings were facilitated by the researchers who allowed time for the group to discuss and explore their own thoughts and beliefs about transience so that their action-research project would be relevant to them (Carr & Kemmis, 1993; Mills, 2003). Some members of the community of practice enjoyed these meetings because they gave teachers the time to talk about transience, gather data about themselves, and share their experiences.

Time was the main issue for teachers throughout this project. They felt that more release time would have allowed them to fully record project data, reflect on their teaching, and implement new teaching initiatives. It was also suggested that starting the project mid-year would have allowed teachers to integrate new teaching approaches into their planning at the start of the following school year. It was also felt that the one-year timeframe was too short to fully implement and evaluate teaching innovations, and only one of the two planned action-research cycles was completed.

Co-constructing knowledge about teaching and learning

Teachers used a class-wide activity aimed at identifying students' strengths, interests, and needs for support as the students described them, and were encouraged to think about how their teaching (instructional organisation, task design, teacher–student and student–student interactions) contributed to, or undermined, “belonging” in a class community. Few specific changes were made to classroom practice as a result of these discussions. However, positive changes were noted for some students.

Developing and evaluating teaching initiatives to improve student learning and social experiences

Teachers actively participated in the meetings, interviews, and observations, but few wrote in their daily teacher diary about their teaching initiatives for the three focus

students and other transient students in the project. A few teachers stated that this was because there was little time in the day to complete them. Teachers suggested that if the narrative diaries: resembled a running record; were in a tick-box format; were placed in convenient places on the wall (e.g., in the staffroom); or were monitored on a weekly basis by the researchers, that they may have used them.

At the end of the year, the researchers discussed this issue with the teachers. They concluded that single diary sheets, returned by email at regular intervals on an assigned date, may be a more successful method of collecting self-reflective data from teachers. It was also suggested that other data collection methods, such as weekly audio-taped peer interviewing, would have been effective.

Specific teaching initiatives to improve student learning and social experiences

The community of practice developed a school-wide protocol for the teaching and learning of transient students. A *Wooldon School Starter Pack* (a pack for new arrivals containing basic stationary; school and community information; and space for a personal statement for children to complete) was created for new students. The *Wooldon School Guidelines for the Induction and Teaching of Transient Students* were also developed. The guidelines included a “tick box” list that highlighted procedures, roles, and responsibilities for teachers to follow at the enrolment of transient students. The guidelines were used with two new families with positive results.

Bullying was identified by students and parents as an issue of concern at several schools, including Wooldon. Teachers, however, initially took a “defensive” (their own words) stance when bullying was raised as an issue in the community of practice, and questions were raised about the role of transient students themselves in provoking bullying. To enable students to anonymously report bullying and seek help, the school responded by placing a “Bullying Box” in the deputy principal's office.

Limitations

The timeframe for the project was insufficient to adequately pursue the implementation of new teaching and learning initiatives in classrooms. Further projects undertaken in this area would require a minimum timeframe of 18 months. This would allow schools to adopt a whole-school approach to research, evaluate, fully explore, and implement changes in teaching practice that enhance transient students' learning and social experiences.



Teachers in this project commented that they needed teaching support to cover additional time needed out of the classroom beyond scheduled meetings. This would have provided further opportunities for focused collaboration with community of practice members and other staff in the school.

Building capability and capacity

This project contributed to an understanding of the complexities involved in moving whole schools towards inclusive teaching practices that address the needs of transient students and enhance student achievement. It has contributed to the building of teaching and research capacity and capability in the participating school. Because the study is located in a rural area school, the research is relevant to similar schools, and particularly to those schools facing similar issues of transience.

Supported by the researchers, teachers were encouraged to critically reflect on their practice within the research context. The researchers gained a deeper understanding of teaching, learning, and practitioner-based action research through an engagement with teachers in their day-to-day practice.

Conclusion

The project highlighted students' and families' experiences of transience and these were used in the community of practice to inform teachers, address preconceptions about transient students, and to contribute to positive changes in teaching practice. The guidelines that were developed by the school were a tangible tool that could be used immediately to support the induction and teaching of new students in the school. Changes to teaching practice were, however, more difficult to implement. The children in this project showed resilience and a willingness to adapt to change. This is an asset with which schools can work. The study also showed that preconceptions of transient students

as "problems" can create barriers to improvements in education. It is the task of schools to promote social and cultural participation, and contribute to the reduction of marginality and exclusion (Henderson, 2001). Children who move frequently between schools need to be viewed as children with strengths, interests, and rights, and not as "transients". This suggests that effecting, and evaluating the impact of, change requires time to address the complexities involved and time to provide teachers with ongoing support.

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