Managing literacy teaching and learning for 'new' and mobile students

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ABSTRACT

This Practical Strategies section focuses on classroom strategies and practices that a group of teachers used in their classrooms to engage 'new' and mobile students in learning and in literacy learning in particular. Some of the strategies relate to creating a welcoming environment for new students and establishing some initial social support to ease students through the transition into a new school. Other strategies consider the academic support that is required and the importance of teachers finding out about their students' learning needs as quickly as possible.

Introduction

According to Urry (2007), the world has taken a 'mobility turn', where mobility is 'central to many people's lives and to the operations of many small and large public, private and non-governmental organisations' (p. 6). Indeed, census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) indicate that many Australian families move residential locations. The reasons for these moves are varied and they include the mobility required by particular occupations, relocations to areas where work is available, searching for better accommodation or finding affordable accommodation, family and cultural reasons, and so on. Not all residential moves require children to change schools. Similarly, not all school changes are accompanied by residential relocations. Parental choice and decision-making about schools, for example, can play a part.

For many schools, changes in the student population are part of the daily routine, while for other schools they are less frequent. However, despite the changing student populations of many schools, it seems that the operational aspects of schooling are to a great extent built on an assumption that student populations are sedentary. For example, classes and staffing are arranged at the beginning of the school year, based on student enrolments at that time, and schools generally plan the curriculum at the beginning of the school year, mapping out how the curriculum will be enacted for the whole of the year. Changes to the student population, however, can occur at any time.

Although changes to the student population can impact on schools, especially in relation to issues of class size and numbers of teachers, students who move schools can also experience the effects of having changed schools. When students arrive at a new school, they have to meet new teachers and new students, cope with a new set of school and classroom routines, and find their way around the physical environment of the new school. Additionally, when students enrol in a new school at times other than the beginning of the school year, they usually enter classes without any knowledge of the curriculum that was taught yesterday, last week or a month ago.

Even though teachers tend to be highly skilled at linking school learning to what students know and have experienced in the communities where they live – thus finding ways to make the curriculum relevant to students' lives – new students often (although not always) come from outside the community

and have different prior knowledges and experiences. As a result, for many new students in classrooms there are significant challenges in trying to negotiate the learning that is expected. At the same time, there are challenges for teachers who are trying to provide appropriate learning opportunities for new students in their classes. It is important, then, to consider student mobility, particularly in relation to the arrival of new students in a class, and to think about how teachers might engage new students in learning. Interestingly, little research has addressed this issue, especially in relation to literacy learning.

The research base: Identifying teachers' strategies and practices

This Practical Strategies presents strategies and practices that were identified in a research project which investigated what teachers 'do' when working with students who are new to a school and to a particular classroom. The research project was conducted at one primary school with high student mobility.

The school is located in a town in the south-east of Queensland. The town serves as the business hub for an agricultural area characterised by small crop farms and beef and dairy cattle properties (see Figure 1). Although the school population was once impacted significantly by the itinerant lifestyles of farm worker families, this is no longer the case. However, student mobility remains high, with many families moving residences and/or schools for multiple reasons. Families indicated the availability of affordable accommodation, lifestyle decisions, family breakup and school choice as some of the reasons for their residential relocations and the subsequent change of schools for their children. The school's student population also includes a significant number of EAL/D (English as an additional language/dialect) students and this has resulted in a multicultural school community.

With its focus on 'new' and mobile students, the research project assumed that teachers have to consider the learning needs of all students who are new to their classrooms, regardless of whether the students have made one or multiple school moves. Although the terms *mobile* and *student mobility* have been used in this article, they are understood as general terms that refer to any school move except those that occur at the usual transition points of schooling, such as the move from primary to secondary school. This has deliberately avoided a definition that takes into consideration the number of moves that a student has made in a specific period of time. Other studies have done that (e.g., Birch & Lally, 1994; Department of Education & Department of Defence, 2002; Fields, 1995; Hotton, Monk, & Pitman, 2004), but we wanted to avoid arguments about the scale or extent of mobility. Instead, the project's focus was on the ways that teachers manage the arrival of new students in their classes.

The research project set out to collect data through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers. The aim was to identify strategies and practices that teachers were using as part of their everyday work. It was recognised that teachers often develop practices that become normalised as part of their daily classroom work and that they often understand such practices as 'nothing out of the ordinary'. In particular, the aim of the research was to identify what teachers 'do' when they have new students in their classrooms and how they engage new students in learning, particularly literacy learning.

Figure 1. The rural environment surrounding the town where the school is located

An initial analysis of the research data identified strategies and practices that the teachers were observed using and those that they said they used. These were clustered into groups according to their reason for use. Following this initial analysis, the teachers involved in the research were invited to review the lists and to consider, discuss and amend the lists as they saw fit. The intent of this Practical Strategies, then, is to share some of the practical ideas and suggestions that the teachers identified as useful when they have new students in their classes. A more theoretical consideration of the data is offered in a paper by Henderson (currently under review).

In thinking about student mobility, the research project was based on several, inter-related understandings. These were that:

1. student movement from one school to another is not unusual;
2. teaching students who are 'new' to a classroom is part of everyday, 'normal' teaching practice;
3. teachers are responsible for providing learning opportunities for all students in their classes, regardless of whether the students have been in the class long term or whether they are newly arrived;
4. deficit discourses are not productive. Framing student mobility as a deficiency of families and/or students tends to absolve teachers of the responsibility to adjust and customise their teaching for new students and, as a result,
5. a preferable focus is what teachers can and might do, in order to make the teaching and learning as productive as possible.

The emphasis, then, is on literacy teaching and learning for all students, including those who are newly arrived in a classroom. Such an approach focuses on those actions that are within teachers' locus of control. That is, they represent the types of things that teachers are doing, and can do, in their own classrooms.

This is different from some of the previous approaches that have focused on managing pupil mobility (e.g., Office for Standards in Education, 2002) or advocating that students should modify their residential moves or 'stay put' (e.g., Hill, Dalley-Trim, Lynch, Navin, & Doyle, 2010). We do not discount the usefulness of other approaches, but rather we have focused here on strategies and practices that teachers might use in their classrooms when they have 'new' students in their classes. What we present is not a set of idealised strategies or strategies that set out to change student or parent behaviour. Rather, we have provided a starting point for teachers to consider what they might do to enable new students to feel as though they belong in their new school and class and to engage in literacy learning.

What about the students who change schools?

Research (e.g., Henderson, 2001; Henderson, under review; Henderson & Woods, 2012) has highlighted that students' experiences of changing schools can be quite varied. This is also evident in a children's book called *Collect your favourite things! We're moving again!* (Oliver & Oborn, 1995):

> Sometimes moving is hard and sometimes it's easy. Going to a new school where I don't know the rules or the teachers or any of the students can be a bit difficult ... (p. 10)

It seems then that we cannot generalise about how changing schools will impact on students. However, being aware of the potential issues is helpful when shaping our teaching practices to cater for all students, regardless of their residential status or the time they have spent at a particular school. In other words, the strategies are about the here and now: What can I do as the teacher to ensure that this new student can engage in learning in my classroom?

Strategies and practices when new students join a class: Possibilities for practice

We recognise that the following list of ideas for engaging 'new' students is not necessarily novel, innovative or unusual. However, we hope that the foregrounding of these ideas as possibilities for practice might highlight some actions or strategies that teachers might implement in their classrooms. Some practices are general and not restricted to thinking about literacy teaching and learning. Others have a more definite focus on literacy.

Creating a welcoming environment

When new students arrive in a class, it is important that the classroom is seen as welcoming and that students can feel as though they belong. It is important for the teacher to build rapport with new students and to make the environment as hospitable as possible. Some of these practices might be helpful:

- have a smile on your face when new students arrive;
- make sure that students' experiences are positive;
- be a good listener;
- learn to 'read' the new students and their moods;
- when you know in advance that a new student is arriving, make sure that there is an available desk;
- have some spare notebooks and pencils available in the classroom, in case new students do not have the stationery that is required. You do not want them to be embarrassed because they do not have the correct materials for class;
- if there is contact with students' parents, build trust with them too;
- sometimes parents will have to be encouraged to give their son/daughter the opportunity for a new start at the new school;
- for those with primary school classes, incorporating a time of day when parents are welcomed into the classroom can be a useful strategy;
- help the new student feel comfortable in the classroom and school environment;
- make sure that you make expectations clear. This might involve making the classroom culture explicit to new students, because the unwritten 'rules' of classrooms are not always obvious to those who are new. This might involve explanations that say: 'In this classroom (or in this school), we …', 'We don't say that here', or 'We do that differently at this school'. This can be particularly important to students from other cultures as well as those from other schools;
- if a new student breaks multiple classroom rules, then it is better to be selective rather than trying to change all behaviours at once. It can be helpful to keep the class informed in such cases, so that they understand why the teacher appears to be ignoring some behaviours. It is also important to keep other staff members (e.g., teacher aides) informed, to ensure consistency amongst staff, in the classroom as well as in the school grounds.

Establishing initial social support

We expect students to perform academically in our classes. Making sure that they are settled socially is generally a pre-requisite to academic success. The previous list focused on building rapport with you, the teacher. The following list focuses on helping to create and build a sense of belonging with the school in general and with class members more specifically:

- appoint a buddy who can help the new student negotiate the organisational aspects and processes of the school day within the classroom;

- before the morning tea and lunch breaks, check that the new student is partnered with the buddy so the school layout and outside-of-classroom processes can be negotiated;
- have a contingency plan, just in case the buddy forgets to assist the new student. For example, it is helpful for new students to know where they are expected to be after a break, or to at least know where to go for directions;
- don't forget to recognise the buddy for the work he/she does. This might need to be done quietly on a one-to-one basis, rather than in a visible way;
- be strategic about where the new student sits in the classroom. Seating the student near a 'good' role model or near a student who will offer peer support will generally be effective;
- observe the new student to make sure that he/she is making friends;
- consider strategies that foster interactions between new students and other class members. One strategy is to change classroom seating plans on a regular basis. This can benefit all students by not 'locking them in' to a particular plan for a long period of time. It can also assist new students by offering opportunities for interactions with students they might not yet have interacted with;
- provide opportunities for contact with ancillary staff, such as the school chaplain. Sometimes support from outside the classroom can assist a student's transition into a new school.

Checking where a new student's learning is at

To ensure the appropriateness of the learning opportunities that are offered, it is important for teachers to know their students and where they are at in terms of learning. The strategies and practices listed in this section are useful for finding out information about new students in a class.

- use your observations in the classroom to get a sense of how the student is coping with classroom activities. You might consider whether the student works independently, copies from other students, asks clarifying questions, and so on;
- make sure that the student is seated in a location where you can observe unobtrusively. Ensuring that the student's desk is easily accessible can be helpful and can facilitate your learning about the new student and where he/she is in terms of the classroom curriculum;
- use available time to work individually with the student. This time can be used to listen to the student read and to gain information about prior learning;
- use informal conversations to gather information. These conversations might be in the classroom or in the school grounds during break times;
- check if the student has brought notebooks or a report from the previous school. These can provide useful information;
- check system databases for information about a new student's learning. For state schools in Queensland, for example, OneSchool is the portal that offers information about students, including their academic achievements (see State of Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2015). Other education systems have their own portals;
- draw on available outside sources of information, e.g., information from the previous school. In some cases, you might want to contact the previous school for additional information;
- if negative information about a student's prior schooling is evident, then pre-judgements should be avoided, because the school and classroom contexts have changed. However, in the event of these behaviours surfacing, a quiet word with the student can highlight the opportunity for a new start at the new school. This shifts the focus to the 'here and now' and away from the student's past history;

- watch for student anxiety. Emotional stress can be a barrier to learning;
- establish a reading level as quickly as possible. You might have a small battery of tests available, but informal opportunities for listening to the student read are a good place to start;
- put the student into a reading group that is slightly lower than what you think the student's level is. This is good for giving a sense of achievement and building self-esteem from the start;
- getting to know what the student can do and noticing gaps in learning will help to provide valuable information for teaching;
- when new students speak English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D), then it can sometimes be helpful to provide opportunities for them to operate in their first language/dialect. This might involve some cross-class or even cross-grade collaborations or seeking advice from a relevant support teacher.

Engaging students in literacy learning

Although it is impossible to generalise about the types of strategies that will work for all students, new students should be engaged in learning as quickly as possible. Additionally, in changing schools, some students have 'missed' schooling during the time that they have relocated; others, however, have no break in attendance, but have simply moved from one school to another. Whatever the circumstances, engagement in learning has to be a priority. This will involve:

- establishing learning expectations early;
- working from students' strengths. Identify what new students can do and link that to the new learning that is expected;
- setting up opportunities where you can observe what students can already do and whether there are gaps in their learning;
- allowing talk between new students and their buddies. This will help students with finding their way in the new classroom environment and understanding classroom routines;
- being aware that assistance from a buddy might mean that you are not seeing what a new student can do alone;
- not putting new students 'on the spot' when they have first arrived in class. Let them see other students answering questions first and sometimes offer them an easier question so that they experience success, as a way of easing their transition into the class;
- using strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw, as a way of fostering success in a group situation, before expecting students to talk in front of the whole class;
- using a range of iPad apps that can build confidence while assisting students to achieve particular learning goals. This strategy and other CALL (computer-assisted language learning) strategies can be effective if a new student has arrived from overseas and is learning English as an additional language;
- providing explicit and focused teaching as appropriate.

Conclusion

The four clusters of strategies that have been identified offer ways of assisting a new student to make a successful transition into a new class in a new school. Effective teachers generally demonstrate an 'adaptive expertise' (McNaughton & Lai, 2009). That is, they are able to expertly adapt their teaching to provide opportunities for learning and to engage their students in learning. Having a range of strategies to draw on can be useful for teachers to become the 'highly knowledgeable, highly adaptable, and highly strategic experts' (McNaughton, 2014, p. 89) that classroom teaching requires them to be.

Although the strategies are important, the ability of teachers to be flexible and to adapt their teaching to cater for their students' individual differences and learning needs is absolutely essential. This became evident in the research project that is reported here. As the teachers unpacked the practices and strategies that they used with new students who had arrived in their classrooms, it became clear that they worked on many fronts at the same time. It was the interplay and interactions between strategies that became important, rather than each individual strategy per se.

As Luke (1999) suggested many years ago, literacy teachers have to assess 'students, their communities, their lifewords', make judgements about the 'kinds of curriculum goals, knowledges, skills, practices' that they need, then 'jiggle, adjust, remediate, shape and build' their classroom pedagogies (pp. 9–10). As the strategies and practices indicate, this is complex work. However, by making them visible and explicit, we hope that we have emphasised a range of considerations for teachers when they have new students in their classes. As McNaughton (2014) indicates, it is vital that teachers are 'deeply knowledgeable about what they do, how they do it, and why they do it' to ensure that they are able to 'ply their practices with great adeptness' (p. 91).

Further information

If you are looking for further information about new or mobile students, then you might like to investigate some of the literature named here. Although the literature about students changing schools seems reasonably limited, information is spread across a range of research areas. It can be located in studies that look at:

- transitions (e.g., Billett et al., 2012; Henderson & Woods, 2012);
- mobile groups (e.g., Bhopal & Myers, 2009; Gobbo, 2009; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013);
- interrupted schooling (e.g., Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006, who discuss the interrupted schooling of refugees);
- absenteeism (Chang and Romero, 2008, for example, highlighted the way that students have to be 'present and engaged in order to learn' the curriculum on offer in a school (p. 3).

Some of the literature, as shown in Table 1, draws attention to strategies that might be used by schools, teachers and parents.

Table 1. Sources of strategies for schools, teachers and parents

Audience	Literature
Schools	Hill, A., Dalley-Trim, L., Lynch, A., Navin, F., & Doyle, T. (2010). Let's stay put: Literacy and numeracy pilot. (Progress report). Townsville, Qld: James Cook University. Hotton, J., Monk, K., & Pitman, S. (2004). *Students move: Supporting students who change school: A guide for schools*. (Report). South Melbourne, Vic.: Oz Child, Children Australia Inc.
Teachers	Henderson, R. (2008). Mobilising multiliteracies: Pedagogy for mobile students. In A. Healy (Ed.), *Multiliteracies and diversity in education: New pedagogies for expanding landscapes* (pp. 168–200). Melbourne: Oxford University Press. Henderson, R. (2012). Teaching literacies: Principles and practices. In R. Henderson (Ed.), *Teaching literacies in the middle years: Pedagogies and diversity* (pp. 3–17). South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press. Henderson, R., & Woods, A. (2012). Teaching for quality and equity: (Re)focusing the lens to make diversity and difference visible. In R. Henderson (Ed.), *Teaching literacies in the middle years: Pedagogies and diversity* (pp. 113–131). South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press.
Parents	Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. (2006). *Changing schools: An information booklet for parents*. Canberra: Author. Defence Community Organisation. (1999). *Changing schools checklist: A guide for mobile defence families*. (Brochure). Canberra: Defence Publishing Service. The Trauma and Grief Network. (n.d.). *Helping your child when they are changing schools*. Canberra: Australian National University and Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

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Merilyn Butt, Michele Foley, **Lee Nolan** and **Karen Stuhmcke** were teachers at one school in the south-east of Queensland at the time of the study's data collection. Together they have over 70 years of teaching experience. They share a passion for teaching and for getting the best out of the students they teach.

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