

A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF  
TRANSIENT STUDENTS IN A HIGHLY MOBILE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

TERRY FRANKLIN DOVER

(Under the Direction of C. Thomas Holmes)

ABSTRACT

This case study explored the perspectives of four elementary school teachers employed at a school that displays a higher than normal student mobility rate. The study attempted to examine if there are prevailing attitudes and opinions regarding how mobile students are viewed by the teacher and classmates, how mobile students affect this school from a teaching standpoint and from a social aspect, and if there are special preparations or specific teacher training provided in a highly mobile school as a prerequisite to adequately address the problems associated with mobile students. Problems that may be evident with mobile students are incomplete transfer records, no prescribed protocol for the pre-assessment of student learning skills, lack of parent involvement in the school and community, and methods of identifying learning gaps created by moving from school to school. After reviewing the available literature and previous research studies in this area, the researcher chose to examine mobility from the classroom teachers' point of view.

A qualitative research design and methods were used to collect and analyze data. Questions posed in an interview were used to direct this study and sought to establish a relationship between student mobility and academic performance. The study sought to uncover

specific data regarding the teachers' perceptions on the definition of mobility, the practices utilized by the teachers in assessing, placing and teaching the mobile student, what effects mobility has on the elementary classroom, and to identify successful strategies in dealing with the mobile student.

Findings of this study indicate the participants exhibit a great deal of pride in the teaching profession. A love of children is evident in their classroom routines and personal attempts to quickly and effectively incorporate new students into their classroom. The data further revealed the mobile student is usually below expectations in academic performance, are usually from lower socio-economic families, and move mostly for economic reasons. This project reaffirms that the classroom teacher is the main factor in the success or failure of transient students.

**INDEX WORDS:** Mobility, Mobile students, Mobility and academic performance, Transient students, Teacher perceptions

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## DEDICATION

The completion of this dissertation is the fulfillment of a dream. Not my dream, but the dream of my late mother, Winnie Marcus Dover. I remember one particular conversation as I showed her a high school grade report card. She told me I should become a doctor because I always had good grades. Although uneducated herself, she knew the value of a good education to getting ahead in life. I know she meant I should become a medical doctor, but I chose education as my profession. I'm sure she wouldn't mind. Mom, it was your memory that kept the dream alive and provided the constant drive I needed to keep going. I made it! I'm a doctor.

To Sookie, my wife of more than 30 years, you will never know the impact you have on my life. You put up with the many mood swings, the long hours with my nose stuck in books, magazine articles, and in front of the computer. The many trips to Athens took so much away from our personal time. It's time to come home! My journey is over and I thank you for your patience and understanding. And I promise to clean up the room and get rid of all that accumulated paper.

To Brad, my son. I am so proud of you and the person you've become. I see in you, the continuation of the hard work and drive to be successful my own parents instilled in me. I see in you the words of my late father, Bishop Dover as he told me, "Son, if you work for a man, give him an honest day's work for a day's pay. And, if you choose to be a ditch digger in life, be the best ditch digger you can be." You are already a success and you reached it much earlier than I

did. I hope my guidance helped along the way. I also know your life's journey is far from over. So, keep steady the course! I will always be proud of you.

And finally, to Brooke, my lovely and energetic granddaughter, you are the future. It is for children like you that I dedicated my professional life. You are, and will always be special to me. You have made my life complete and I love you more than I ever thought possible to love anyone. I'm now ready to go, whenever and wherever you choose. I have the time and am free of distractions. Let's play!

This dissertation is a tribute to my family. Without them, there would be no inspiration, no drive, no purpose. I dedicate this to all of you, many years too late. This experience has been difficult but gratifying and I'm glad it's over. It took a long time, but dreams do come true!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

There is a widely held belief among professional educators that students who are subjected to transferring from one school to another on a frequent basis suffer negative effects to their learning and performance (Fowler & Finn, 2001; Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999). Studies have supported that changing school does affect student learning and furthermore, a highly mobile population can adversely affect overall school and district performance (Fitchen, 1994; Kerbow, 1996; Newman, 1966; Sewell, 1982). Frequent relocation interrupts regular attendance, disturbs the continuity of lesson content, and hinders the development of a student's relationship with teachers and peers, all of which point to the negative findings of some student mobility studies (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood, 1993). High student mobility rates also have a detrimental effect on the acquisition of early basic skills that are critical to a good beginning in school (Brent & DiObilba, 1993; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989). Students that fall behind during the early years have a more difficult time building learning skills and may never fully recover to the skills level of their non-mobile counterparts.

The issue of mobility cannot be researched in a narrow approach. There are other causes that are interconnected to the mobility issue. Some issues and student characteristics may be similar for all students who experience residential and/or school relocation within a school year. Windler (2002) found there are specific issues that are faced by mobile students who live in

poverty that are not associated with students who relocate due to parental career choice, academic advancement, or other reasons.

In reporting on successful strategies to close the achievement gap, Lopez (2003) stated that:

For American children that move more than average, mobility is usually the result of involuntary residential instability caused by poverty and family disruption. These children do not experience residential mobility as an aberration or anomaly; it is an ongoing characteristic of their life. If the academic performance of poor students is to be improved, then the relationship between student mobility and academic achievement must be understood. If the academic performance of poor schools in poor neighborhoods is to be improved, then the relationship between student mobility and academic achievement must be understood. (p. 1)

State and local education agencies are increasingly being held accountable for the education of *all* students. With the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* being signed into law on January 8, 2001, schools across the nation faced a more stringent and immediate challenge to providing quality education to all children. This legislation is the most sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965. The mission of this legislation is to ensure that every child in the United States is successful in school, and to close the achievement gap evident in today's schools by redefining the federal role in K-12 education. Special emphasis was given to closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. Now, whether a student faces such contributing factors as being historically low-achieving, limited English proficient, frequently mobile, homeless, or is the product of a more desirable stable educational setting, no distinction is made under the law for the learning of all children (*No Child Left Behind Act*, 2001).

President George W. Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act* only three days after taking office. In doing so, he announced his framework for education reform out of concern that

“too many of our neediest children are being left behind,” despite the nearly \$200 billion in federal spending since the passage of the ESEA in 1965. The success of the law is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanding options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have proven to work (No Child Left Behind Act, Executive Summary, 2002).

States receiving federal funding now had to implement statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. These systems were based on challenging state standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3-8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Assessment results and state progress objectives are required to be disaggregated and reported by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind.

Prior to the emphasis of *No Child Left Behind*, former Georgia Governor Roy Barnes, in an attempt to reform education in this state, proposed sweeping changes through his *A+ Education Reform Act of 2000*. Passed by the legislature and signed into law effective July 1, 2000, this law, known as HB 1187, provided a comprehensive reform of the delivery of education services at the pre-kindergarten through post secondary levels. Even though HB 1187 preceded *No Child Left Behind* by two years, many of the Georgia expectations of student performance improvement that would occur in the later federal legislation, occur in the state's plan. While not known at the time, this gave the state of Georgia a jump-start on the changes brought about by *No Child Left Behind*. Other states were caught off guard and saw the federal mandates as unrealistic and impractical to implement within the expected time frame. This created difficulties among the states which reacted with sudden drastic changes to the education



being provided at the lower levels and an unexpected restructuring of funding for local education. Some states continue to have difficulty interpreting and applying the law. A few missed the federally mandated deadlines to begin implementation of *No Child Left Behind*.

One major focus of HB 1187 was to establish guidelines for measuring student performance by providing a comprehensive standardized testing program for students in grade one through 12. Students in grades 3, 5, 8 and 10 would have to meet these new grade level standards or not be promoted to the next grade level.

The Georgia Office of Educational Accountability (OEA) was established to determine the level of competency expected (Act 685; HB 1187, 2001). The level of accomplishment is divided into three levels. The two levels of high achievement, "proficient" and "advanced", determine how well children are mastering the material in the State academic content standards. The third level of achievement, labeled "basic", provides information on the progress of lower-achieving children toward mastering the proficient and advanced levels. The OEA is currently developing these performance measures and indicators that provide basis for an accountability Report Card for every public school in Georgia. Should a school not meet the established standards, they could be rated as a "failing school", thus posing a risk in the loss of state funds, being placed under the administration of a state appointed Improvement Team, or being required to allow their students, by state mandate, to transfer out of their existing school, at local school system expense, to another school within the district that does not have a "failing" grade. As an incentive to meet the high expectations, schools would be eligible for State Academic Achievement Awards.

Another of the performance areas proposed is student attendance. The criteria for rating schools on attendance is to have no more than 5% of students enrolled miss 15 days or more to

achieve an "exemplary" rating. If more than 5% but less than 15% are out of school 15 days or more, the school could still obtain an "acceptable" rating. If more than 15% of students are absent 15 days or more, the school will receive an unacceptable rating (Office of Education Accountability, 2002).

There are a total of 10 state performance standard areas which will include drop out rate, completion rate, percentage of graduating students passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT), scoring results of the SAT and ACT, and the average time a student remains in the Early Intervention Program (EIP) of study. These standards are currently under development and remain a work in progress toward full implementation. The *No Child Left Behind* law requires that each state establish "a single, statewide accountability system" that in part holds schools, districts and the state accountable for demonstrating Average Yearly Progress (AYP) in increasing student achievement and closing achievement gaps. These goals point toward 100% proficiency in Average Yearly Progress by the 2013-2014 school year.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of selected teachers in a Georgia school district regarding student mobility within one school. Such a study would determine if there are prevailing attitudes and opinions regarding how mobile students are viewed, how they affect this school, and if there are special preparations or specific teacher training provided in a highly mobile school as a prerequisite to adequately address the problems associated with mobile students. Those problems may include incomplete transfer records, pre-assessment of learning skills, parent involvement in the school and community, and identification of learning gaps created by moving from school to school.

## Background of the Study

There is a growing concern among educators regarding student mobility as it relates to school and district accountability measures imposed by state and federal legislation (*A+ Education Reform Act of 2000; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965 ; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001*). Figures provided by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998) show that Georgia had a population increase of 15.9% between 1990 and 1997. This came on the heels of an 18.6% increase from 1980 to 1990, giving a 20 year growth surge for the state. U.S. Census figures from 1990 show that 20% of families with school-age children relocate annually, which often results in children entering a new school. Citing further national figures, a 2001 U.S. Census Bureau report shows that 4.3 million Americans changed residences between March 1999 and March 2000.

These figures correlate directly to public school student mobility figures from across our nation (U.S. General Accounting Office Report, 1994). The United States and the state of Georgia show a steady increase in population growth (U.S Bureau of the Census, 1998). As an example of growth over the past decade, the 1997 population for Georgia was 7,486,000. The 1998 population as of July 1, was reported as 7,642,207, an increase of 152,225 residents. Assuming similar growth each year, the state of Georgia would increase by some 1.5 million residents over a 10 year period.

Some of the growth may be attributed to an increase in live births, but the majority of increase is due to relocation of families from one area to another within the U.S. or from an influx of immigrants coming to the United States (Geographic Mobility Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Because school is in session during 10 of the 12 calendar months, it is very

likely a large portion of this relocation occurs during the school term, which is one of the motivating factors for conducting this study.

Average figures from the U.S. Department of Education (1999) show that mobility within the same county in Georgia is 10.5%, movement to a different county within the state is 5.5%, while movement to a different state is 2.4%. Historically, student mobility follows the same general statistics across the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) figures estimate that a half-million children attended three or more schools between the first and third grades.

In studies conducted in Texas (Parades, 1993), New Jersey (Brent & DeObilda, 1993), Colorado (Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989), New York (Fitchen, 1994), Kentucky (Ersing & Sutphen, 1997) and Illinois (Kerbow, 1995; Rumberger, 1999), similar statistics reaffirm this pattern of mobility at being close to 16% across states. These statistics are consistent with the U.S. Bureau of the Census figures for 1995, 16.7%, or about 1 out of 6 changes in residence each year. It is also interesting to note that when compared to several western countries and Japan, American children have one of the highest mobility rates (Long, 1992).

### Research Questions

The overall purpose of the study was to determine if there are varying beliefs in what constitutes “student mobility,” and how one school copes with transient students as they first enroll in school. The perspectives from 4 teachers from various grade levels within the same school were used in this study. From these interviews the researcher sought to answer:

1. What is the relationship between student mobility and academic performance.

2. What do teachers think of transient student's education abilities, performance and prior educational training?
3. What can be done to effectively prepare schools and teachers for a highly mobile student population?

### Theoretical Framework

Qualitative research was chosen as the method of data collection for this study.

Qualitative research is the attempt to understand human behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions through the use of observations, interviews or archival analysis (Crotty, p.74). By using data from interviews, conclusions are drawn from real world experiences.

Symbolic interactionism was the methodological theoretical framework that guided the collection and interpretation of the data. Blumer (1969) stated that symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Blumer "sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people" (p.4). He felt the researcher should have close enough contact with the situation being researched to guide the study.

Symbolic interactionism is grounded on a number of basic ideas or "root images" (Blumer, 1969). These root images refer to and depict the nature of human groups or societies, social interaction, objects, the human being as an actor, human action, and the interconnection of the lines of action (p. 6). Taken together, these root images represent the way symbolic interactionism views human society and conduct, thus constituting the framework of study and analysis.

This study was conducted in a K-5 public elementary school that serves a suburban area of a large city in Northeast Georgia. This school was selected because of its high rate of student

mobility as recorded over a period of years and is one of 20 elementary schools in the chosen school district.

A case study approach was used with the semi-structured interview as a means of collecting spontaneous, specific, and relevant answers to deliberate questions regarding mobile students. Komarovsky (1967) concluded, "one of the functions of case studies is to suggest explanatory clues for empirical generalizations derived by qualitative techniques" (p. 349).

Fieldnotes were taken during the interviews to assist in coding statements for analysis and interpretation. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants were provided the opportunity to review the written transcripts from the interviews for clarification or for additional information.

#### Significance of the Study

Studies have been conducted on the impact of mobility on several aspects of academic achievement: test scores, grades, retention, and high school completion (Ersing & Sutphen, 2003; Ingersoll et al., 1989; Kerbow, 1995; Rumberger & Larsen, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Yet in drawing final conclusions using the hard data from these studies, it proves to be one of the most elusive statistics in education today. School districts typically report some form of mobility rate, but these rates are not often comparable across districts because different formulas, as well as different time frames, are most often used (Ligon & Paredes, 1992).

Poor school attendance is usually a characteristic of student mobility. Students may leave one school and not enroll in a new school for several days or even weeks later. Several relocations within one school year could lead to a severe loss of school time (Varlas, 2002). Also, the families of mobile students frequently do not see the need to take a firm stand on school attendance thus allowing children to stay home more frequently without justified cause. A

school with a high student mobility rate will be more likely to have difficulty meeting the state's performance standard in the area of attendance. (Curtin, 2002; Rumberger, 1999; Varlas, 2002; Williams, 1996).

As the nation's schools pay greater attention to higher academic standards advocated by national and state legislation, mobile children may face increased difficulty in achieving success that also impacts school and district performance ratings. Except for migrant children, little is currently done to help children whose frequent school changes affect the continuity of their schooling. Making broad changes in the curriculum for students who do not participate long enough to benefit is an exercise in futility (Kerbow, 1996). Without a certain level of stability, self-evaluation and strategic planning for future changes in education are compromised.

#### Assumptions of the Study

The participants in this study were voluntary, after being approached initially by the researcher and asked to participate. It is assumed:

- 1- the participants have given accurate answers to the questions posed,
- 2- the responses given can be coded using qualitative measures, and
- 3- the identification of issues faced by the teachers might be useful to others encountering similar situations.

The qualitative approach provides opportunity for first-hand knowledge to be a predictor of the feelings and beliefs of the participants. The information taken from this study could possibly help educators develop initiatives to lessen the negative effects of student mobility and to better prepare for future student enrollment. Furthermore, schools and school districts could use information from this study to develop a more useful and comprehensive record keeping and

record sending system that could help educators evaluate mobile students upon enrollment in a new school.

### Definition of Terms

This section includes definitions of terms important to the understanding of this study. By being able to comprehend the terminology of the research, the reader will have a better working knowledge of the intent of the researcher and better follow the findings and recommendations.

Assessment - A method of determining progress toward a common goal. In education, student assessment may be through the use of standardized testing, or in some other locally developed measures of improvement. For schools and school systems, assessment will be a comparison of the ability to meet required standards imposed on them by governing or regulatory agencies.

Education Skills – The ability of a student to read, write, and perform arithmetic functions at a level commensurate with his/her age and grade placement.

Elementary School – A school that has any grade combination of pre-kindergarten through six. The school in this study has a K-5 grade configuration.

Grade Level – An assessment of student skills indicate the student is in line with others of similar age and grade placement at a particular grade placement.

Mobility (mobile students) – The non-promotional transfer of a student from one school to another. The transfer may occur either at the end of a school term or within the school year.

Performance – The ability of a student to meet the expectations of the school. Also, it could mean the ability of the school to meet the expectations of the governing body (state school board, department of education, or local government agency).



Transient (transient student) – A student that changes from one school to another for any reason other than an end of the year promotion. Transient students and mobile students, for the purposes of this study, have the same meaning and may be used interchangeably.

#### Limitations of the Study

To gather information for this study, four teachers were selected from a school within a single school district. Because of these parameters, the sampling is small so generalizing will not be attempted. Attempts to collect data from other sources were not made nor were attempts made to compare this school with another. Therefore, the data used in this study was limited to that collected through the initial interview and focused only on the participants' perspective of the challenges and issues faced. No particular attention was given to racial diversity or gender of the participants, and no limitations were placed on the years of teaching experience or previous experiences with mobile students.

#### Overview of Research Procedures

To increase the understanding of the impact of mobility on student, school and district performance, this case study was conducted using a semi-structured interview as a method of gathering data. Maccoby and Maccoby (1954) described the interview as “a face to face verbal interchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinions or belief from another person or persons” (p. 499). A written guide of questions was prepared and participants provided the opportunity to review the interview questions in advance of the actual interview. During the interview, the questions were loosely presented to help participants elaborate on the question’s intent. Fieldnotes were taken during the interview to assist participants in elaborating on different aspects of the questions posed. The researcher used participant answers to search deeper into the subject or to gain further clarification of meanings.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. In reviewing the written transcripts, labels were placed on key points and similar responses from participants coded. This allowed for consolidation of data and identification of common themes.

#### Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 included a brief introduction to the topic of student mobility, definition of terms common to the study, and the explanation of the purpose of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the related literature and current research on student mobility, effects of mobility on performance, and a description of initiatives to address mobility. Chapter 3 delineates the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides the summary and implications of this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter is a review of the available literature on student mobility and will include results of several mobility studies conducted in different locations across the United States. The various studies point to a possible relationship between student mobility and student and school performance. While the mobility of children is often a reflection of family issues, it is the schools that must face the difficult challenge of meeting the educational needs of those children especially in light of new accountability standards imposed on schools and school districts.

#### Historical Background

The United States has long been characterized as a nation “on the move”. Recent studies show that high mobility likewise applies to school children. Family moves often cause school transfers. In many inner-city schools, classroom turnover of 50% or more during the school year is not unusual (Lash & Kilpatrick, 1990; Levine, Wesolowski, & Corbett, 1966). Until recently, school mobility was perceived to be beyond the control and responsibility of schools and communities. It was assumed that high student mobility would lead to undesirable outcomes for mobile students. But mobility was viewed as a naturally occurring phenomenon that could not be controlled. Research now shows that undesirable outcomes are also a result for the non-mobile students and that initiatives can be implemented that positively affect mobility statistics and the performance of the highly mobile student (Bruno & Isken, 1996).

At least one study (Temple & Reynolds, 1997), found that mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause of poor school performance because of other background characteristics.

This study found that mobile students came from poorer families and had lower academic performance before they were mobile, a finding supported by other studies (Nelson et al., 1996).

While the majority of reasons people move are housing related, there are other reasons as well. A survey by the U.S. Census Bureau (2001) grouped common reasons under four groupings: housing, family, employment, and other. Some of the most common reasons given for moving are a parent's loss of employment or a job related transfer to a new location, separation or divorce in the home, death in the family (usually a parent), a desire to leave substandard or unaffordable housing, difficulties with landlords, eviction and/or property condemnation, or financial reasons such as the inability to pay rent. In some cases, families move continuously by design, sometimes to take advantage of special incentives at competing apartment complexes and sometimes to leave a more difficult "trail" to follow. By taking advantage of these move-in specials at housing complexes, a family may get to "skip" a rent payment for a month or more which is a very real incentive when family finances are tight (Scheevel, 1994).

The impact of children's education becomes secondary to providing the basic needs of food and shelter. Fitchen (1994) found that the key to reducing mobility is access to decent low-cost housing. In this same study, Fitchen found that a single mother, a young couple; or a never married, divorced, or separated individual is the most vulnerable to becoming highly mobile. The school or school system itself, by responding to such factors as overcrowding, class size reduction, suspension and expulsion policies, attendance policies, and the general academic and social climate also contribute to student mobility (Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, et al., 1999).

Student mobility may not always involve a change to a different school, yet any move carries social and emotional implications. In an issue of *The Responsive Classroom* (1988),

published by the Northeast Foundation for Children, it was noted that it is very common for negative behaviors to escalate when a child knows there is a change of schools in the near future. The report explained that, psychologically, a student would want the teacher and other students to pull away so it would be easier to leave.

It is possible for a student to change residences without switching to a new school. Most housing moves are of short distances. Between March 1998 and March 1999, 59% of the moves recorded by the Commerce Department's Census Bureau were within the same county. Yet, only a small number of housing moves are so short that a change in schools would not be necessary. If it was possible to remain in the same school, the transition is easier because old friends and established routines are maintained. However, if the child's home life is neighborhood oriented, there may be an impact on the emotional stability because of leaving friends and neighbors. A student may change residence which requires moving to a new school within the district. This type of move also is less critical because the student will be familiar with curriculum materials, grading and promotion procedures and expectations for dress, behavior and performance. In recent years, many areas of the United States have shown an increase in students due to international relocation. The children involved in this type of move not only leave the familiar surroundings of their neighborhoods, schools, family and friends, they often relocate to a place where the native language is totally different and cultural expectations unknown.

Another type of move is more social oriented. Families now make life-altering decisions to escape high crime rates or to find better schools. Mobility that results in any form of school change is the greatest threat to academic achievement and the school environment (Biernat & Jax, 2000).

One type of family move that is not statistically seen as a negative is with military families. Military families tend to be more stable even though routine transfers are a way of military life. Military families have regular incomes, and most military bases offer on-site schools or support for its mobile families. Military children, although frequent movers, are the least effected by changing schools (Vail, 1996).

Using data from the Georgia Department of Education (1998) and simple calculations using the average school size of 500 students at the elementary level, 700 at the middle school and 1000 at the high school, the state would need 30 additional elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and 8 new high schools each year through the 2003 school year just to keep up with anticipated student growth.

Historically, 400 new schools have been built since 1989 (Georgia Department of Education, 1998). None of these new schools opened with a student body composed entirely of just new students. When a school opened, it did so as a replacement school or with a student body built from the rezoning of existing students from nearby schools. In some cases, local school districts allowed students and parents some choice with voluntary transfers at upper grade levels, mainly high schools. But, elementary and middle schools opened with required zoning of students to adequately balance student numbers in the district.

### Legislation

Historically, education was designed to meet the needs of religious, agricultural, military and industrial powers. In today's society, learning is based on a student becoming a successful person in any field he chooses. The first schools appeared in Colonial America and the first law regulating education was in Massachusetts in 1647. Although the U.S. Constitution does not finance education in the states (*San Antonio School District v. Rodrigues*, 1973), education is

provided through public schools funded through state tax collection or similar means. However, the Constitution does insure that those public schools must be open to all children on an equal bases. While basic in nature, the courts have interpreted the Constitutional provisions as a protection to all children's education (*Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896*).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 is the law that authorizes and regulates the majority of federal K-12 education programs. Congress first enacted the law to improve achievement among poor and disadvantaged students. Over the years, Congress has amended and added to the original law in order to raise standards, build in accountability, and provide flexibility to schools and districts in the use of federal education dollars.

The Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvements Amendments of 1988, among other things, established funds for migrant students through the Title I section of this law. Migrant students are highly mobile because of the nature of migrant work, and students frequently change schools multiple times within the same school year. Research has shown this category of low socio-economic students as being the greatest risk on three accounts; poverty increases the risk of academic failure; mobility increases the risk of academic failure; and poverty increases the risk of frequent mobility (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001). In an attempt to get at the root of the problem of mobility, recent legislation proposes to limit migrant educational services to migrant children who have changed school districts within the last two years. This will severely impact the services provided because Migrant students are mobile by nature. It appears the legislature proposes to limit mobility by withholding supportive funding.

Homeless children generally have difficulty attending school regularly and can easily fall behind their peers because of transportation issues, untreated or unattended health issues, barriers to enrollment , or actual relocations (National Center for Homeless Education, 2001). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, (reauthorized January 2002), entitles homeless children to that same free education given to all children in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The reauthorization law pays specific attention to children that do not have a permanent residence by requiring schools to remove barriers to their enrollment, attendance, and success in school.

The “No Child Left Behind Act”, which also is part of this reauthorization, gives high priority to minimizing the achievement gap between highly mobile students and their non-mobile peers. Inherent in this legislation is the understanding of student mobility as a contributor to this achievement gap and its impact on academic success. Indirectly the school district is expected to explore ways to reduce mobility or to lessen its negative effects in order for the district to meet the new standards of performance and accountability that appears within the new laws (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

#### Research Studies

Early reviews found a confusing array of research findings. There were 11 studies concluding that mobility had no influence on those who moved, 12 studies concluding that mobility resulted in lower performance, and 5 studies concluding that mobility resulted in higher performance (Bourke &Naylor, 1971, as cited by Lacy & Blane, 1979).

The most widely held belief of current times is that mobility does adversely affect student performance and is supported with recent research. Problems associated with mobility include



poor attendance, a higher drop out rate, lagging academic performance, and lower social development (Kerbow, 1996).

U.S. Department of Education Secretary, Richard Riley reports there are about 3 million children born each year as compared to 40 million Americans who change residences within that same time period. Pribesh and Downey (1999) found that approximately 25% of all residential moves involve children changing schools. This makes mobility far more important than births in predicting population changes. According to Secretary Riley, the states with the lowest rates of high school graduation and college admissions are the five most transient states in the United States (Hodgkinson, 2000). Georgia is included among those identified states that also include California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida.

#### Impact on Students

High student mobility has consequences for students, both mobile and non-mobile, and can threaten educational progress, curriculum continuity and school stability. For students, the long-term effects of high mobility include lower achievement levels and slower academic pacing, culminating in a reduced likelihood of high school completion. For residentially unstable students such as the homeless, migrant, and foster care children, high mobility is another barrier to an adequate education. Low-income and minority students are more likely to experience excessive classroom mobility. There is a strong correlation between poverty and the risk of academic failure, and a strong correlation between poverty and frequent mobility (Wright, 1999).

A U.S. Department of Education (1992) study found that when children change schools frequently, they are more likely to drop out of school, as high as four times more likely when a change of school occurs four or more times. Other results include a more frequent occurrence of

behavioral issues with mobile children are more than twice as likely to have nutrition, health, or hygiene problems (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 1994). In addition, a strong relationship exists between levels of mobility and the relative strength of social support networks, such as the family, church, other relatives, neighbors, friends, or outside agencies (Fitchen, 1994).

The U.S. Government Accounting Office (1994) reaffirmed the Department of Education study by reporting that children who change schools more than three times before eighth grade are at least four times more likely to drop out of school. A similar study found that successive school changes result in a cumulative academic lag. Students who move more than three times in a six-year period can fall one full academic year behind the more stable students (Kerbow, 1996).

Ersing & Sutphen (2000) conducted a study involving 35 elementary schools in Kentucky. The regression results suggested that highly mobile students, those having three or more moves, were likely to have significantly lower reading scores, and increased school absences compared to their stable counterparts. It further revealed that highly mobile students were 5 times more likely to be referred to Child Protective Services and 2 times more likely to receive a behavioral referral compared to students who had never changed schools.

It appears that the more frequent the move, the more difficult it is in the recovery of lost achievement. Research has shown (CRESPAR, 1995) that single time movers often recover lost achievement in the following years. For example, the effects of changing schools in second grade may have an immediate impact on achievement in that particular grade. There follows an adjustment period, which may or may not be reflected in test scores during that school year. If

no additional move occurs, a student will make the necessary adjustment, make up any deficits resulting from the move, and return to the normal achievement level.

However, the more frequent the move, the larger the difference becomes and the less likely it is for the student to make up the lost achievement and to remain at performance grade level. Children who are frequent movers are 35% more likely to repeat a grade, which further hinders their age appropriate progress and jeopardizes peer relationships. High school students who change schools are at least twice as likely not to graduate. Research by Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy (1999) indicates that only 60% of mobile high school age students will graduate.

#### Impact on the Schools/School System

High student mobility puts enormous strain on schools to make effective staffing, budgetary, and calendar decisions (Newman, 1988; Sewell, 1982). High mobility rates can slow curriculum and place a strain on teachers to meet the expectations of performance (CRESPAR, 1995). Unsatisfactory and low-performing schools generally have more transient students and serve more free lunches, according to statistics released from a Denver study (Curtin, 2002).

If a significant number of students enroll in a school during the academic year, even on the day before mandatory testing, these student's scores will be counted as part of the overall achievement level for that school even though it is obvious none of the students prior preparation and knowledge can be linked to the efforts of the school.

At one time, it was deemed necessary for Georgia's schools to begin classes after Labor Day. Due to the agrarian nature of the state's economy, it was important to have children at home during the early harvest time of late summer. To start school before then would lead to poor attendance during the beginning weeks of school. Now, in those areas of the state that have

large farming operations, a consideration for the number of migrant families that move from harvest season to harvest season have to be considered. When tracking a migrant family, it was not unusual to follow one family from the southern part of the state where vegetables are harvested early, into the middle part of the state where peaches are a major crop. Later in the summer and into the fall, North Georgia offered temporary jobs in the apple growing areas. From there, migrant workers would continue to travel to other job opportunities northward or return to Florida to begin the process over again. Now that the state economy has changed, this is no longer a factor and schools can begin at most any time they choose. Some school districts are now providing calendars that have the look approaching a year-round schedule.

The significance to this study is that there is no "down time" when a family move would be less harmful. With school in session most of the calendar year, parents have less choice of when to move a family to a new house or new town with the least impact on the child's education.

When a student withdraws from school, a portion of the funding for the school withdraws, too. This may impact the school's ability to provide programs such as ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages), Migrant Education Programs, or special programs for remediation of low achieving students (Florida Division of Teaching and Learning, 2002).

An influx or exodus of students place significant constraints on the instructional approach of teachers in several ways (Vail, 1996). First, long-term instructional planning, a time-consuming process in any context, becomes more difficult. Many students for whom a unit was particularly pertinent may leave. Other students who have not been exposed to the first several weeks of a unit of study are likely to replace them. This exchange of students also makes

assessment of instructional impact less clear as teachers are less able to observe directly the effects of their practices in many instances.

Classroom instruction may be focused more to a “generic” student rather than the specific composition of the class since the composition is likely to be changed with students moving in or out. A recent report on Chicago teachers found that in unstable schools, teachers report lower levels of collaboration with their peers, less collective focus on student learning, and a lower orientation to innovative instruction (Sebring, et al., 1995).

Finally, teachers may become more review-oriented in their lesson plans. New students have missed the specific instruction that preceded their arrival in the class. They have to be brought into the lesson in some way. Slowing down the pace of introducing new topics and reviewing old materials is an alternative that in many respects seem to be a perfectly rational response by a classroom teacher. Thus, the introduction of new students, especially those who are weak academically, may be disruptive to the flow of instruction for all students. This “flattening” pattern of curricular pacing is not unexpected for the mobile schools and limits the amount of material to which all students are exposed, not just mobile students.

Kerbow (1996) found that although instructional content appears similar in first grade, a pacing gap becomes evident by second grade. This discrepancy widens across the next two years and reaches its largest difference by fourth grade. In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade mobile classroom, students actually have a level of emphasis equivalent to fourth grade in the stable school classroom. Although the gap narrows slightly during the upper grades, the mobile schools continue to lag behind their stable counterparts by approximately one grade level throughout these years.

Students who move frequently tend to need increasing review of previous skills to determine their learning ability and current learning levels. For students who do not move, their

learning may be impacted by the instruction and content geared for those who are mobile. By reducing the school's curricular pace, mobility lessens the achievement of all students in a school (CRESPAR, 1996).

Some states look at student mobility data as a demographic variable when compiling state-wide test scores. However, the reality of current mobility statistics is that they are based on available data gathered by the research group from within, rather than appropriate data that is provided by a national group. The result is many variations in reporting information. As can be seen by reviewing the various research projects, there are numerous ways to differentiate mobile and stable student populations.

The most common method of calculating mobility includes both the number of students who leave a school and the number who enroll within a certain period (usually between the beginning and ending of the school year). These numbers are added and then divided by the number of students attending the school in order to convert mobility to a percentage of enrolment. This approach introduces certain ambiguities. For example, schools may have the same percentage mobility rate but one school may lose a high number of its students who are replaced by a similar number of new transfers during the year. This percentage can be identical in a school that loses a small number of students that are replaced by a like small number of new students. Many teachers have 22 students in the fall and 22 students the following spring, but 20 out of the 22 are different students (Hodgkinson, 2000).

Most states are concerned about student performance and use standardized test scores as the common indicator. More frequently today, national standardized tests provide the public with a comparison of student's scores using percentile ranks in a national sample. Individual schools in Georgia, as well as in other states, by looking at scores on national

standardized tests, can compare the progress of students within the state with those who took the same test across the nation. Is this a fair and consistent way to assess all student progress? The answer is “NO”, especially if mobility is not considered as a factor in test performance and a more consistent method of determining a standard for mobile students is not devised for all states administering the same test instrument.

For example, North Carolina students who take the required standardized tests must have been enrolled in school more than one-half of the instructional period (91 of the 180 days of school) while Texas students are excluded from accountability measures if they were not enrolled the last Friday in October of the current school year. Florida’s comprehensive assessments are based only on eligible students enrolled in both the October and February FTE (full time equivalent) student count at the same school. And, Kentucky students must be enrolled in the school on the first day of the two week window for testing in the spring. Additional proposals are being made in other states as well. These proposals include counting students who were enrolled in the October FTE student count and who take the spring assessment in the same school, or counting students at a school who have been enrolled in the same school for more than one half of the current school year prior to the first date of the spring testing window.

In order for standardized test scores to appear as appealing as possible to the public, some districts use the practice of excluding mobile student’s test scores. Others will include these scores in published data by disaggregating them for the purpose of showing the effect of mobility on performance. Still others have adopted policy that allows a student to remain in the same school for the remainder of the school term if a physical move outside the school boundaries occur during the year. One provision of the McKinney-Vento Act provides for transportation

funds so migrant students can remain in the same school throughout the year rather than transfer due to another family move. This legislation is often referred to as the “one school, one year” law.

As you can see from these explanations, mobility is a performance factor that is not being fairly applied across the nation.

### Specific Research Studies

The specific research reviewed included studies conducted in both urban and rural settings in a variety of large cities, New York, Chicago, Denver, and states, New Jersey, California, Kentucky, and Texas. While there is not an overwhelming amount of empirical data available, the topic of student mobility has generated enough interest that conclusions can be drawn from those studies.

One such study conducted by the Texas Education Agency in 1996-1997 attempted to answer some assumptions concerning student mobility and its’ relationship to student achievement. By conducting a longitudinal study across the state, they were able to generalize relationships and draw conclusions from the data gathered.

This study used test scores on the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) and measured both Reading and Mathematics scores. In looking at these scores, student’s personal history of mobility within one school year was used as a factor. The question was posed, “is a student’s test performance affected by such factors as frequency (number of moves), time of the school year a move occurs, or type of move (forced vs. voluntary and temporary vs. permanent).

Three general findings were noted. First, those students who moved just once have higher mean scores than those who moved several times. Therefore, the conclusion is the less frequent the mobility occurred, the better the student performed. Second, students who moved



between the third and fourth six weeks grading period (usually around the Christmas holiday break), have slightly higher scores than those who moved at other times during the school year. This leads to the conclusion that if there is going to be a change in schools, the best time to do it is near the middle of the school term. The third finding indicated that students who moved between the fifth and sixth six-week grading period (just before the spring assessment), performed the worse. This conclusion points to students who move toward the end of the school term as more likely to perform poorly. It is also a distinct possibility that such a move at this time is not the only move during the school year. It is possible and highly likely that multiple moves occur among students who change schools near the end of the school year. Students who move at this time may still be assessed on required standardized test instruments and their scores recorded for a school where they received very little or no academic preparation. This may lead to lower school or district scores if a significant number of mobile students are assessed in this manner.

A study conducted in the Denver, Colorado Public Schools (Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989) reported that mobility had the most negative effect on student achievement at the early grade levels. Not coincidentally, mobility rates were also found to be the highest at the early grade levels. Wood (1993) concluded that mobile students also are more likely to have behavioral problems which in turn often affect academic performance.

A family move disrupts the routines, relationships, and attachments that define the child's world. A move creates a situation where almost everything outside the family that is familiar and comfortable changes. Thus, the child has to develop new friendships and adjust to new teachers and a new way of doing things. Children vary in their capacity and motivation with respect to dealing with psychological transition into new settings. These adjustments are often

too numerous and far beyond the social and physical capability of the young learner. Older students usually make transitions easier than the younger children. Students entering late in a school year often find it especially difficult to connect and adjust. Making friends means finding ways to be accepted into a complex social setting that has been established over time, which the new student does not have a lot of due to the late enrollment.

The Coddington Life Events Record (Johnson, 1987) records stressful events among children. This study places changing schools on the same level as the hospitalization of a parent for a serious illness, or having a parent in jail for 30 days.

A study of second grade students in two urban elementary schools in New Jersey (Brent & DiObilda, 1993) found similar conclusions in both schools. Mobile students scored significantly lower than stable students, especially in the subject of reading. In a follow up study by the Research for Better Schools in New Jersey, student mobility in the urban districts was analyzed. The study investigated the relationship between mobility of high school students and their performance on the HSPT (High School Proficiency Test), a set of proficiency exams required for graduation in the state of New Jersey. The study concluded that a student's number of consecutive years enrolled in the same district was one positive factor related to successful HSPT performance.

Fitchen (1994) conducted field research in rural New York. She determined that the rural poor were more mobile than the general population. She noted that most of the residential mobility in rural areas occurred within the same county. But even a change of residence involving just a short distance often required the child to enroll in a new school or district, which likely had different teaching approaches and textbooks.

Families in rural communities are at an increased risk of becoming mobile because:

- Nearly all executive-and high-ranking managerial positions tend to be in cities.
- The "single industry" nature of rural communities (e.g.; agriculture, mining) limits economic flexibility when the industry, or economic stronghold, of the community is in jeopardy.
- The single industry nature threatens the rural economy when sensitivity to a fluctuating manufacturing and export rates are applied.
- There is a current trend to "move urban".
- A higher rate of poverty exists in rural communities.
- Rural workers, on average, earn four-fifths of their urban counterpart's salary.
- Economic "booms" tend to benefit urban areas, but not rural communities.

(Stalker, 2001).

Kerbow (1996) concluded in his study of Chicago elementary schools, that students who transfer from school to school may struggle with instructional practices that proceed at a different pace with each new teacher. The new teacher may know little about the student's ability and skill level so the student may miss the opportunity to move through the new curriculum at their own pace. Likewise, they may be placed in the wrong ability group or fall behind if they have missed foundational concepts that are necessary for the development of complex material. Kerbow also found that by the sixth grade, highly mobile students fall behind about two thirds of a year, and stable students in schools which experience high student mobility fall behind about half a year.

Lash and Kirkpatrick (1994) studied teacher beliefs about student mobility and strategies used to assist transfer students. They found that urban teachers planned their teaching as though students would be with them continuously throughout the school year.

It was found that teachers who expect a high transient rate spend more time with new students to orient them. Time is spent reviewing materials repeatedly for new students, leading to fewer topics being covered over the course of a school year.

### Demographics of Mobility

Studies have also shown that males are more frequent movers than females. Whites moves less often than blacks and Hispanics, and the economically disadvantaged win the prize as the most frequent movers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Students enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Programs are less likely to move, assumed to be due to their more stable family environment. Mobility rates were higher in primary grades (K-5), and the high school grades (8-12), as compared to the elementary grades (3-7), which had the lowest rates of mobility (Ligon & Parades, 1992).

Another contributing factor that must be considered yet has limited research data is the mobility of school personnel. It is not only students and their families that move frequently but superintendents, administrators, and teachers as well. More research is needed in this area so school personnel can better prepare for both improving student achievement and meeting the mandates of school performance (Kerbow, 1996).

### Role of the Family

Recent studies show there are two types of student mobility that stand out. The first is inner-city mobility, which is prompted by fluctuations in the job market. This includes migrant families and follows a predictable pattern which allows schools to alter their services to better

meet student needs. The second, more difficult to predict, is intra-city mobility, which is prompted by social status. Upwardly mobile families that have the financial means to change homes, families living in poverty who have constant economic hardship and are forced to frequently change where they live, and the homeless who may not have any form of permanent housing, make up this category. Intra-city mobility includes mainly urban students with moves that occur for individual reasons. Movement tends to follow no set pattern, thus are hard to predict with any degree of certainty (Mao, Whitsett, & Mellor, 1998).

There are studies that have examined the impact of mobility on several aspects of academic achievement: test scores, grades, retention, and high school completion. Yet studies that account for background differences find that mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause of poor school performance. At least one study of mobile students in Chicago found that half of the achievement differences between mobile and stable students could be attributed to differences between the students that pre-dated their school changes (Temple & Reynolds, 1997). While this was the only study found to make such a claim, it cannot be discounted as not being relevant to the topic.

And, what about the education support mobile parents provide their children at home? For the most part, mobile children have less support for their studies at home (Kerbow, 1996). Their parents are struggling to provide food, clothing and shelter therefore these priorities limit a parent's ability to participate in the child's education. Often, the parents or guardians are uneducated themselves and are unable to provide help with homework assignments or school projects. Their main concern may be providing food, shelter and clothing so they seldom visit the school and disregard requests for parent conferences.

The importance of a child's family in times of transition and stress is well documented in available literature. Open communication and viewing a move as a common family goal increases the likelihood of a successful transition (Hausman & Reed, 1991; Hazler & Nass, 1988). A child's resilience to specific situations is largely dependent on the emotional support received during traumatic life events (Miller, 1990). Offering this support includes providing children with familiar routines and allowing them to have access to familiar personal belongings (Jalongo, 1985; Matter & Matter, 1988), as well as encouraging them to maintain ties with the extended family in spite of geographic separation.

Plucker and Yecke (1999) conducted studies to investigate the impact of moving on gifted children. Part of their finding was that the family played a significant role in the lives of all the gifted children studied, both in general and with regard to relocations. Many of the older children indicated that they were actively involved in decision making concerning family moves and they believed their family relationships kept them going through difficult times.

Children who have well-educated parents tend to have a scholastic advantage over other children that may off-set some of the adverse effects of transition. A study by Straits (1987) found that a school-age move may increase the dropout rate among children of less educated parents. Among teenagers who had moved since starting school, 74% whose family head has less than eight years of education were still enrolled in school. This is compared to 84% whose family head completed eight to 10 years of education, and 94% whose family head had over 10 years of schooling.

### Chapter Summary

Historically, student mobility figures follow the same general statistics across the nation. Studies conducted in Texas, New Jersey, Colorado, New York, Kentucky, and Illinois show

similar patterns of mobility close to the 16% national figure given by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for 1995. The national figure of 16.7% represents approximately one out of six residents change locations each year. It is also interesting to note that when compared to several western countries and Japan, American children have one of the highest mobility rates (Fenwick, Smith & Blackman, 2002). When comparing U.S. students with students from other countries, the mobility rate is not disaggregated so no comparison of performance levels can be drawn from the available statistics.

Mobility of students challenge educators by decreasing the opportunities to establish a long-term relationship between the school and home. Except for the federally funded Migrant Education program, little is currently being done to help children whose frequent school changes affect the continuity of their schooling.

Mobile students often “outrun” their performance records, frequently relocating to a new school before their records are received at their previous school. A child’s school records often take 2 to 6 weeks to arrive at a new school, according to data collected by the California Department of Education and others (GAO Report, 1994). Even the most well-meaning of parents seldom have school records suitable for school personnel to use in evaluating performance. Without records, administrators and teachers must decide where to place a child without knowing of his or her ability. Teachers find it difficult to assess the needs of new children, determine their past educational experiences, and provide instruction that builds on these experiences. Teachers don’t know if the new student has a learning disability, has physical restrictions, or is a behavior problem.

Some states are experimenting with computerized student records. The federal Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS) was established to transfer information from a

migrant child's former school district to the new school district. However, it still does not provide timely and complete information. California is one of only a few states that have recently begun to pilot an electronic student record format. When completed, it is expected to be put in use to transfer the records of all children, not just migrants. The format is based on common data standards for transferring student records and was developed by a group of state and local educators with experience in information management (GAO, 1994).

Parents are often not helpful, especially if there were difficulties at the previous school. Sometimes parents think the solution to their child's educational problems is to move to a new school to allow them a chance to start over. For that reason, they often hide, and at the very least, don't volunteer information that would be useful in the placement process.

School records are often not comparable across states and districts. Individual school districts are allowed to choose particular standards of measure (testing), which means there are no consistencies across school district borders. Also, each state determines which student assessment company to use, the instrument of choice and the determination of which grade level to apply the assessment. Some states, and at least one county in Georgia has developed its' own assessment instrument (GA CRCT, Gwinnett County Gateway Test). If a school is fortunate enough to receive student records in a timely manner, they often have to decipher grading systems, interpret different standardized test scores, and determine the meaning of assessments which may be included in those records received.

These students may also be receiving services from their previous school that is not available in their new school. For example, the federally funded Migrant Education Program usually targets the mobile student. However, not all schools have access to a migrant teacher so support services to the family may be lost due to the family move to a school not funded for



migrant services. Also, services developed for one population may suddenly become unnecessary as many of its users move during the school year.

A U.S. Department of Education (1992) study found that when children change schools frequently, they are more likely to drop out of school, as high as four times more likely when a change of schools occurs four or more times.

A Prospects Study conducted by the United States General Accounting Office (1994) provided a report to the Honorable Marcy Kaptur, House of Representatives, on the harm of a child's mobility to education in the Elementary School. The results were:

1. the lower the family income, the more likely it is for students to change schools frequently;
2. inner city children are more likely to change school more frequently when compared with suburban or rural children;
3. 41% of students who changed school frequently are low achievers compared to 26% who have never changed school;
4. students who changed school frequently have more behavior problems
5. students who changed school frequently are 2 ½ times as likely to repeat a grade; and
6. students who changed school frequently are twice as likely to have health and hygiene problems.

Research findings compiled by the Office of Special Services for the United States General Accounting Office further provide these findings and the effect of mobility:

- \* Students suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from mobility. Mobile students are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities and more likely to act out or get in trouble

(Fitchen, 1994; Ingersoll, Scamann & Eckerling, 1989; Kerbow, 1996; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Rumberger, 1999; Wood, 1993; Wright, 1999).

- \* Students changing schools that suffered two or more negative life events in the year prior to the transfer had lower grades in writing, lower self-esteem scores, and higher rates of mobility compared to children that experience no negative life events (Johnson, 1987; Miller, 1990; Newman, 1988).
- \* Students who switch schools frequently score lower on standardized tests (Brent & DiObilda, 1993; General Accounting Office, 1994; Mao, Whitsett & Mellor, 1997; Newman, 1988; Shuler, 1990; Simpson & Fowler, 1994).
- \* It takes 4-6 months to recover academically after changing schools (CRESPAR, 1995; General Accounting Office, 1994; Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, 1999).
- \* Mobility during high school greatly diminishes the likelihood of graduation. Students who changed high schools even once were less than half as likely as stable students to graduate, even controlling other factors (Brown, 1996; Haveman & Wolfe, 1994; Ludon, 1986; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996).
- \* There are two specific groups whose educational performance does not seem to be adversely affected by mobility....children living in military families, and students classified as academically gifted (Plucker & Yecke, 1999; Vail, 1996).
- \* Mobility hurts worse for low socio-economic students who change schools often but more advantaged students who are frequent movers also face academic consequences. These children tend to be female, non-white, frequently absent, often tardy, have poor study habits, and have been retained at least once (CRESPAR, 1996; Fitchen, 1994; Kerbow, 1996; Nelson, Simoni & Adelman, 1996; Newman, 1988; Shuler, 1990; Temple & Reynolds, 1997; Tucker, Marx & Long, 1988).
- \* Mobility also hurts non-mobile students. Average scores for non-mobile students were significantly lower in high schools with high student mobility rates (CRESPAR, 1996; Field, 1984; Kerbow, 1996; Vail, 1996).

- \* Schools serving large numbers of students at-risk experience high rates of mobility as students with similar at-risk factors come and go. Schools that have higher achievement levels have less student mobility and the mobility they do experience involves students from other higher achieving schools (Bruno & Isken, 1996; Fitchen, 1994; Kerbow, 1996; Mao, Whitsell & Mellor, 1997; Newman, 1988; Sewell, 1982).
- \* Teacher mobility appears to move counter to student mobility. Mobile students tend to move among schools with high student mobility. Teachers tend to move away from schools with high student mobility.
- \* Schools with a highly mobile student population face an ongoing loss of teaching experience, loss of staff continuity, and an increased burden in continually having to recruit and train new teachers (Kerbow, 1996; Ligon & Parades, 1992).

Given the findings of these and other studies, it is noteworthy to look at policy implications that may either reduce the level of mobility or mediate its potentially negative impact on students and schools. By reviewing instructional practices, examining programs, and developing a plan of action to minimize the effects of mobility on student performance, schools and school districts will be more likely to meet the requirements imposed on them by state and federal guidelines. More importantly, they will better meet the needs of the individual student academically, socially, and emotionally.

### Conclusion

The motivation for this study was the continued increase in student population as a result of mobility from a variety of sources along with the key issue of accountability facing education today. In Georgia, the state legislature and former governor passed detailed reform laws in an attempt to reverse downward trends in student achievement levels in order to improve the quality of education in Georgia's schools. However, there is a failure to address student mobility as a possible cause of this downward trend. The review of literature provided in this chapter

overwhelmingly supports the concern for student mobility as a contributing factor in individual, school and district performance.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

#### Methodology

Chapter 3 detailed the research design and the data collection procedures, data sources, and data analysis strategies. The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of selected teachers toward transient (mobile) students in a chosen school. The results of such a study should determine if there are varying beliefs in what student mobility is and project how these students are evaluated for educational skills and how they likely will perform in a new school. The study will further determine if any organized teaching activities or materials are used to improve the academic skills performance of the transient student. Finally, the study will identify commonalities or differing opinions among the participating teachers about how mobility affects the school setting in which the study was conducted.

#### Research Design

Symbolic interactionism as taught by Blumer, is the process of interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals. Blumer (1969) described his discipline as:

“A down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. It consists of what they experience and do, individually and collectively, as they engage in their respective forms of living.” (p. 35)

Envisioned as the study of the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations, symbolic interactionism developed ways to explain and understand the people as they “go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day to day basis” (Pruss, p. 10). It is very much

a “down to earth” approach in that day-to-day practices and experiences are grounded in what is being studied.

Blumer’s theory rests on 3 core principles: meaning, language, and thought. Meaning to those people or things. Accordingly, Blumer (1969) indicated, “the meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regards to that thing" (p. 4). Therefore, meaning is a social product that arises out of the process of extended interaction between people. This affirms the “actions of others are instrumental in the formation of meaning for any given individual and in regard to any specific object” (Blumer, p. 48).

The second principle is language. Language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. It is an interpretive process. It is by engaging in speech with others that humans come to identify meaning (p. 4). Accessing or sharing a common language does not mean that people will automatically act in cooperative ways but it does provide the basis on which people establish common understandings. Through ongoing interaction with others, one may establish a more comprehensive understanding of the viewpoints of others and will serve as a more detailed viewpoint of ones self (Pruss, p. 11).

The third premise further distinguishes symbolic interactionism as it is the actual process of interpretation through thought. Thought is based on language; therefore, it is a mental conversation or dialogue that requires consideration of differing points of view. “The social action of people is treated as an outward flow or expression of forces playing on them rather than as acts which are built up by people through their interpretation of the situation in which they are placed” (Blumer, 1969, pp. 83-84).

Symbolic interactionism is grounded on a number of basic ideas, called "root images" (Blumer, p. 6). These root images refer to and depict the nature of human groups or societies, social interaction, objects, the human being as an actor, human action, and the interactionism of the lines of action. When taken together, these root images represent the way in which symbolic interactionism views human society and conduct. They constitute the framework of study and analysis.

This research study was based on the interaction of 4 selected public school elementary teachers with the students in their classroom, the parents, and other school staff over an unspecified period of time. Within the school selected for the study, there is a history of students frequently moving in and out during the school year at a higher rate than other schools within the same district.

Over a period of time, dealing with a high rate of mobility among students led the participants to develop their own individual classroom assessment methods, instructional techniques, and practices in building social skills among students. Communication between teachers and other teachers, teachers and parents, and teachers and school staff allowed the development of personal opinions about the effect of student mobility on their classroom and school.

Symbolic interactionism is the framework that guided the research design with regard to the experiences of the teachers who participated in this study. By inquiring extensively into the experiences of others, a great deal can be learned about the world of those interviewed. The data gathered through the interview process were an outcome of the meanings that the participants had placed on the interactions with others in actual school settings.

## Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Qualitative Research provides a foundation for producing broad generalizability.

Generalizability can be defined as the extension of research findings and conclusions from a study conducted on a sample population to the population at large. By using a sample population for gathering research data, one can generalize the results to a larger population. However, this research project was isolated in one school with a limited number of participants.

Qualitative Research explores traits of individuals and settings that cannot easily be described numerically. The information is largely verbal and is collected through observation, description, and recording (Charles, 1995). One kind of data collection common to qualitative research is through the process of using in-depth, open ended interviews. By setting up a situation where an interviewer guides the participant through a series of questions, data related to a particular topic can be collected. The data from interviews consist of “direct quotations from people about their experiences opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 1990, p. 12).

### Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

1. identify, describe, and examine the experiences of selected teachers who are familiar with the procedures and experiences of enrolling, assessing, and with the procedures and experiences of enrolling, assessing, and teaching students in this school;
2. identify patterns and themes that characterize enrollment and withdrawal of students during a school term;



3. determine and promote the available activities, materials, and processes for assessing skill levels of mobile students;
4. to determine what assessment and learning strategies were used by teachers in assisting low performing students to be successful (or to become successful);
5. to determine the administrative practices of this school in locating student records and placing mobile students appropriately in grade levels, specific classrooms, or special services.

The constant comparison method of data analysis was used in this research process. This method is used during grounded research whereby newly gathered data are continually compared with previously collected data in order to refine the development of theoretical categories. By comparing data continually with other data, the researcher may detect emerging categories and themes. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985, p. 339), the constant comparison method follows four distinct stages:

1. comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. integrating categories and their properties,
3. delimiting the theory, and
4. writing the theory. (p. 339)

The essential task of the constant comparison method of qualitative research is to bring together into categories those bits of data that apparently relate to the same content. By reviewing the information provided in the interview and by reviewing fieldnotes, the researcher looked for similarities or differences within the data from each of the participants.

The first determination from this investigation was to seek a significant difference in the verbal responses to identical questions posed to each of the selected participants. First to be determined: were there different definitions for a transient (mobile) student, does there exist different personal perspectives of what transiency is, and how do teachers react differently or alike to students as they enter or withdraw from their classroom? From that start, additional questions were explored for additional instances of phenomena that could be grouped together to provide statistical data. After review of the initial interview data and fieldnotes, themes and common practices were isolated and compared, then used as a basis for the findings in this research.

### Interview Questions

The interview questions were intended to find the affect student mobility has on the classroom and to identify those practices and procedures used by teachers in effectively integrating new students into the daily routines. This includes questions about how mobility affects the existing students as well as the student that is moving in or moving out of the school. The questions also examined the teacher's assessment of new students for the purpose of instructional placement and the practices used to socially integrate new students into the classroom. And finally, an examination of the role school procedures (enrollment, placement, records, etc.) and parents have on the phenomenon of mobility is sought. These interview questions are shown in Appendix A.

### Design of the Study

This study was an exploratory effort in that no baseline data from this school system existed on transient student's performance and in the school's required procedures for enrolling, assessing, and placing of students once the school year was in progress. A qualitative

methodology was chosen for this study to allow the data collection to be formulated from personal descriptions from the teachers (N=4) interviewed. From transcriptions of the interviews, the researcher coded data to find common patterns across the participants in the hope to provide insight into the attitudes and beliefs of school personnel regarding student mobility and to identify common effects mobility has on student performance.

A qualitative study was chosen as the methodology because quantitative data would prove too difficult to obtain. There is limited quantitative research available in the area of student mobility and what is available is limited to a specific geographic area (rural or urban) in a specific state. Also, these studies do not use the same criteria for identifying mobility or for comparing statistical information. While the possibility exists that a quantitative study using standardized test scores may provide more comparable and stable data, such data were not readily available in the school selected. One of the reasons hard data were not available is that the recent changes in student evaluation procedures required by the Georgia Department of Education has led this school system to reevaluate its testing program. The reevaluation resulted in a change in the standardized testing program used in the system. This change would not allow for longitudinal comparison of test scores because the scores over a three year period are from three different tests: Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Stanford Achievement Test, 9th Edition (SAT-9), and the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT).

Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because it places an emphasis on the natural settings, verbal narratives, and flexible designs, emphasizing participant's own spoken words and observable behaviors (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Qualitative research refers to whether or not phenomena are capable of being found in the real world and assessed by means of the senses (Schwandt, 1997). The parameters affecting the process of working with transient

students can be more effectively examined from the participants who actually interact on a daily basis with this population of students in a school setting. Qualitative research techniques, particularly the case study, provide data from the real experiences of the participants. By interviewing teachers, the data collected represent the “real world,” with no preconceived or theoretical notions.

There are various types of case studies based on the number of participants included, theory used, and end product. Case studies may have different purposes in mind, be conducted at differing analytical levels, and expect different actions from the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this particular study, a multiple-subject case study approach was used to gather the perspectives of four public school elementary classroom teachers who were responsible for providing assessment and instruction for a highly mobile student population.

The interview process included a semi-structured style that lent itself to allowing the participants to answer questions, extend ideas, and to openly reflect about their responses. By receptive listening, posing open-ended questions, and probing responses further with open-ended statements such as, “can you explain ‘that’ more”, the researcher would begin by introducing the topic, then guided the discussion through the use of specific questions. Data collected in this manner was more personal and the responses more realistic to the topic.

The interviews were audio-taped and a written transcription developed afterward. The same questions were posed to all interview participants; yet, the researcher remained flexible enough to let the participants elaborate and to reflect orally on their responses. Participants were asked to answer from the perspective of their work educating mobile students. By using the same questions, it was possible to draw conclusions from both similar and differing responses.

This study provided an opportunity for beliefs and assumptions to be shared through the detailed answers to questions posed in a semi-structured interview. The data collected provided personal descriptions and individual thought that was then interpreted and compared. There were no right and wrong answers to any question posed during the interview. The study attempted to capture the social and cultural patterns of experience and the significance of these events as they affected the participants.

This study is considered an effort of ethnographic inquiry. Ethnographic inquiry “seeks to uncover meaning and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people’s overall world view or culture” (Crotty, p. 7). By transcribing the audio-taped recordings of each interview, it was possible to study in close detail the step-by-step organization in each participant’s course of action and assisted in the analysis of data. Themes emerged from the review of the transcribed interviews. This process allowed the researcher to code for common ideas or practices that were identified from the interview and to isolate themes that appeared across two or more of the interviews.

#### Data Collection Methods

The method of data collection in this study was the interview. Kvale stated that:

“The interviewer does not merely collect statements like gathering small stones on a beach. His or her questions lead up to what aspects of a topic the subject will address and the interviewers active listening and following up on the answers co-determines the course of the conversation.” (Kvale, 1996, p. 183)

Additionally, fieldnotes were taken during the interview as the participants elaborated on different aspects of student mobility. A set of questions were used and provided to the participants in advance of the interview to assist them in formulating answers. As participants answered set questions, more detailed questions were posed by the interviewer to search deeper

for more meaning. The sessions were open to the extent that the researcher was prepared to follow unexpected leads that arose during the course of each individual interview. The sessions were depth-probing in that the researcher pursued all points of interest by using such leading expressions as “tell me more,” “what do you mean by,” “explain that in more detail,” and “how do you feel about.” The intent was to “capture the unseen that was, is, will be, or should be; how respondents think or feel about something; and how they explain or account for something” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 16). Fieldnotes were taken during the interview to list interesting points and observations as well as “recording ideas, strategies, reflections, and hunches as well as note patterns that emerge” (Bogdan & Biklen, p.107). After the interview, participants received a copy of the transcript so they could make additions, modifications, or corrections to the interview.

### Data Analysis

“Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview, transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others” (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 153). Through the use of data analysis, emerging themes and trends about the process or impact of mobile students were identified from within the transcripts.

During the collection stage, audio recordings were transcribed as soon as possible after the live interview in order to gain familiarity with the contents. Upon review of each transcript, the researcher read through the written transcription and made notes in the margins and highlighted main ideas. Key words and phrases were picked out and quotes deemed of importance were marked for future reference. Special attention was given to similar answers or repeated phrases. These became the focus of the research conclusions and provided emphasis for

detailed investigation. From the audio recordings, there were a total of 52 pages of transcriptions taken from the four participants interviews. Table 3.1 summarizes the interview schedules.

Table 3.1  
Summary of Interviews

|             | Name Given | Pages of Transcription | Date         | Time   | Length     |
|-------------|------------|------------------------|--------------|--------|------------|
| Teacher # 1 | Jane       | 14                     | September 9  | 2:55pm | 25 minutes |
| Teacher # 2 | Barbara    | 14                     | September 11 | 1:25pm | 40 minutes |
| Teacher # 3 | Gina       | 11                     | September 25 | 1:30pm | 25 minutes |
| Teacher # 4 | Ellie      | 13                     | September 11 | 3:10pm | 25 minutes |

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential element in education research. The professional ethics of research go beyond consideration of conduct that is forbidden or intentionally misleading. It is essential for a researcher to eliminate acts of recklessness or negligence so that deception is not an indicator of the findings. There must exist a level of trust where results reported by others are valid and the works of others acknowledged properly (Whitbeck, 1995). There are four methods identified in establishing trustworthiness: validity, reliability, generalizability, and neutrality.

#### Validity

Validity measures the extent to which the research is measuring what it says it is. In conducting research, different inferences and conclusions may be drawn from the data collected. Many of these conclusions are related to the process and not the major hypothesis of the study. However, when reported, these provide the foundation for substantive conclusions that play an important role in reporting findings of the study.

Validity can be divided into four types. Each type addresses a specific methodological question. Each validity type builds on one another. Conclusion validity asks the question, “Is there a relationship between the two variables?” Internal validity addresses the question, “Assuming that there is a relationship in this study, is the relationship a causal one?” Construct validity asks, “Assuming that there is a causal relationship in this study, can we claim that the program reflected well our construct of the program and that our measure reflected well our idea of the construct of the measure?” Or simply, did we implement the program we intended to implement and did we measure the outcome we wanted to measure? And finally, external validity: Assuming that there is a causal relationship in this study between the constructs of the cause and the effect, can we generalize this effect to other persons, places, or times?”

There are always possible threats to validity, or reasons the conclusion or inference might be wrong. Ideally, the researcher tries to reduce the plausibility of the most likely threats to validity, thereby leaving as most plausible the conclusion reached in the study (Trochim, 2002).

This study was built around open-ended questions posed in an interview format. Participants were asked to review responses and to consider the themes identified with regard to internal validity. This is an effort to control for observer biases and insure conclusions of the study are presented from the participants view point.

### Reliability

Reliability refers to the extent that a measure of a concept, would deliver the exact same results no matter how many times it was applied to random members of the same target group. The principle is that another research should reproduce the methodology exactly, with the results being substantively similar. To put this on a simpler level, if two different researchers were studying the same thing at different times and/or locations, they would come up with similar



conclusions even though they worked independently of each other. Likewise, future researchers could replicate the study and find similar conclusions.

### Generalizability

Generalizability is the extent to which the findings of one study can be used as knowledge about other populations and situations. Generalizability is applied by researchers in an academic setting as an extension of research findings and conclusions from a study conducted on a sample population to the population at large. In many ways, generalizability amounts to nothing more than making predictions based on a recurring experience. If something occurs frequently, we expect that it will continue to do so in the future.

### Neutrality

In a qualitative case study, it is essential to have the participants provide candid and honest information. This candidness will happen only if the participants respect the researcher and believe in his or her integrity. An informed consent form was presented prior to the interviews explaining the intent of the study (Exhibit B). Questions for use in the interviews were open-ended which allowed participants to answer freely and without prejudice. Pseudonyms were used to insure confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Transcripts were not available to anyone other than the researcher.

### Limitations of the Study

The design of this study relied on the accurate recording of the interview process along with accompanying field notes and in-depth probing of participant's answers. The researcher entered into this data collection with biases but attempted to keep personal opinions and existing biases from entering into the data collection process.

The design of this study relied on the accurate recording of the interview process along with accompanying field notes and in-depth probing of participant's answers. The researcher entered into this data collection with biases but attempted to keep personal opinions and existing biases from entering into the data collection process.

For example, the researcher believed that mobile students are more likely to suffer performance deficiencies when compared to students that remain stable in a school environment. It is the researcher's personal belief that success of students depends largely on the attitude and support of parents and the school's ability to involve the parents in their child's education. Furthermore, the researcher believed there is no established formal procedure for evaluating and placing mobile students in schools. Although some schools have developed their own individual practices, this is not believed to be a wide-spread occurrence. This attitude is in agreement with various studies which determine lost achievement and lagging performance when compared to similar students with comparable learning abilities.

#### School Description

The sample population included four public school teachers from various grade levels who have at least five years teaching experience and who had an advanced teaching certification in the state of Georgia. This criteria was chosen to better insure the participants had multiple opportunities to experience mobile students in their classroom, and who would be proficient as a teacher in facing non-traditional educational problems. However, final selection was left to the researcher. The participants were employed within the same school in the same school system. The school system selected was the employer for the researcher. Personal knowledge of the system and school administration was a factor in selection. It was believed that permission to collect data within this system would be easily arranged. The school that was selected was done

so by an examination of monthly attendance data obtained from the school system Director of Student Services. The Director of Student Services was responsible for tracking student attendance and school enrollment at each school in the county system and was knowledgeable about historical trends in each individual school attendance relative to attendance and mobility rates. The site chosen, Dean Elementary School, a pseudonym, showed a higher than usual mobility rate when compared to the other schools in the district. The Principal of the school assisted in identifying teachers who would be useful in this research.

### Profile of Research Setting

Dean Elementary is a pseudonym given to the school selected for the research. Dean Elementary was opened in 1976 to serve a suburban area of a large, northeast Georgia city. Opened as a Kindergarten through sixth grade school, it today houses 635 students in grades Kindergarten through five. The student population increased continually leading to 23 classroom additions in 2 different construction projects. Even with these additional classrooms, portable classrooms are still in use at this site. In addition, the construction of a new elementary school, which drew significant number of Dean Elementary students in a rezoning move by the school board, did not prevent the school from having to use portables for classroom space.

Dean Elementary is a Title I school and did not meet the state standards of student performance and was placed in the “failing school” category during the 2002-2003 school year. In accordance with the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the school was required to allow parents a choice to enroll their child in another designated school within the district. However, this option produced only two student transfers out of Dean Elementary School. The community in which Dean Elementary is located was once mostly rural. A major highway was added to the area which served to increase interest in the area by large businesses and industry. While it now

provides some such large industrial plants and other businesses, it is growing and constantly changing to a more urban setting as available land is being developed into housing units. Dean Elementary School is within five miles of a small airport serving non-commercial airplanes. An increase in subdivision development, mobile home parks, and rental housing areas have resulted in a continuous increase in student population and currently provide living quarters for the majority of Dean's students.

Ethnic composition has changed dramatically in the past five years. The population of white students decreased from 68% in 1996 to near 30% in 2001. The minority population increased from 32% in 1996 to 71% in 2001. The largest gain was in the Hispanic race. Transience of students has been consistently above 50%. Over the five years previous to this study, student mobility shows a downward trend in the percentage of student change in the school's yearly population. The five year history of student mobility in this school is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2  
Student Transience  
1997 – 2002

| Year    | Number Entered | Number of Withdrawn | Total Entered/Withdrawn | % of Change |
|---------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| 97 – 98 | 222            | 221                 | 443                     | 78.4%       |
| 98 – 99 | 235            | 175                 | 410                     | 67.4%       |
| 99 – 00 | 255            | 220                 | 475                     | 72.8%       |
| 00 – 01 | 205            | 209                 | 414                     | 59.7%       |
| 01 – 02 | 177            | 165                 | 342                     | 48.7%       |

Even with this downward trend, the number of students who enter and the number of students who withdraw during the school year still gives this school a higher than normal rate of change. It is this mobility that causes many of the problems for the teacher in the classrooms and sets the stage for this research project.

Over the past 3 years, approximately 48% of the students entering Dean Elementary School came from other schools within the school system. Another 16% of the students came from within the state while 14% of the students came from a separate school system serving the largest city within the county's geographic boundary. About 13% of the students came from schools in other states and the final 9% of the students came directly from other countries.

The largest percentage of the minority population is Hispanic. So, by conducting a review of the high percentage of minority populations (71%) and comparing it to the low percentage of students entering from other countries (9%), this suggests that Dean Elementary School is not the first stop for students entering the United States. Therefore, most have entered another school within the United States prior to entering Dean Elementary which indicates they have school records and assessments that should follow their change to a new school.

When examining withdrawal data, it shows that approximately 53% of the students withdrew to other schools within the school district. Approximately 20% went to other Georgia schools, with 13% of the students withdrawing to the city school system. Another 13% of the students went to schools in other areas while the final 2% left Dean Elementary for another country outside the United States. The numbers of students entering and leaving Dean Elementary School each year is fairly consistent, giving the impression of the school having a "revolving door."

The school staff consists of 35 regular education classroom teachers, 1 special education resource teacher, 5 English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, and one each full-time physical education, art, and music teachers. There are 8 paraprofessionals mainly serving the Kindergarten program and computer lab. A principal, assistant principal, media specialist, and a counselor comprise the administration of the school. A school nurse is provided by the school system through a federal grant funded by the federal tobacco settlement money filtered down to the states. To compliment the teaching staff, recent personnel additions were in the form of a bilingual Parent Liaison and a full-time literacy and full-time math coach to assist teachers in pre/post testing of students, modeling lessons and mentoring teachers to improve classroom instruction. Itinerant personnel include a school psychologist, a social worker, a half-time speech and language therapist, and half-time teacher of students who qualify under the state's gifted criteria. Funding from a Title III grant provides a full time Newcomers ESOL teacher.

The school currently has eight teachers who are bilingual in Spanish, the largest population of minority student population. Slightly more than half the staff holds upper level degree certification and the staff has a mean average of just slightly less than 15 years of teaching at Dean Elementary School. The teaching staff shows a commitment to the school and its students by remaining stable through the most recent years. However, Table 3.3 shows teacher turnover has gradually increased each year for the past three years.

Table 3.3  
Teacher Turnover  
1999 – 2002

|   | 1999 – 2000 | 2000 – 20001 | 2001 – 2002 |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Number of Certified Teachers Employed During the Year           | 46          | 50           | 58          |
| Number of Certified Teachers NOT Employed in the Following Year | 3           | 9            | 16          |
| Turnover Percentage   | 6%          | 18%          | 27%         |

### Participants

Participants were recruited through professional contacts. Of particular use in the process was the Director of Student Services who is responsible for enrollment and attendance data at each school within the system. This person has first-hand knowledge of local enrollment trends and is expected to provide realistic projections to the Superintendent and School Board for their use in planning the construction of new schools and in aiding the rezoning of students due to overcrowded student populations.

To assure anonymity, the names of the participants were changed and pseudonyms given to assist the researcher only to connect the response with the respondent. Other than the specifications chosen by the researcher, the participants were not known outside the project.

Participants were provided an opportunity to review the questions prior to the interviews. The interviews were conducted at a site mutually agreed upon, after school hours. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview so notation could be made regarding observable data (body language, voice inflections, hesitations, etc.).

The common traits among the participants chosen by the researcher include:

1. All 4 participants held advanced teacher/administrator certification (MEd, EdS, or EdD).
2. All had at least five years experience in the present school location.
3. All participants were Caucasian.
4. All participants were female.
5. Three of the four participants taught their entire career at Dean Elementary
6. Three of the four participants were between the ages of 40 and 50. The remaining participant was between the age of 30 and 40.

Information about the participants professional training and experience were obtained through the use of a data information sheet (Exhibit C) submitted by each participant prior to scheduling the interview. This allowed for any corrections or additions prior to the start of data collection and provided the researcher comparison traits such as age, race, gender, teaching experience, and history of teaching.

Ellie, a pseudonym, is currently a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher. She holds a T-5 certification and earned her Bachelors and Masters degree from the same institution of higher learning. Ellie previously taught in two other school systems before accepting a teaching position at Dean Elementary. Ellie has been employed at Dean Elementary for the past 10 years.



Barbara, a pseudonym, has spent her entire teaching career at Dean Elementary School. After completion of a Bachelors degree from a major state university, she completed requirements for the MED at a local university while teaching full time. She recently changed grade levels. After teaching upper elementary for seven years, including one year of a multi-age classroom, she switched to a kindergarten classroom for the 2002 - 2003 school year.

Gina, a pseudonym, has the most teaching experience of all participants. Gina completed her Bachelors and Masters from the same regional university in the northern part of the state and has been teaching for 20 years. After teaching intermediate grades and several years of multi-age classes, her current assignment is that of a Math Coach, a position created by the Lake County School District, a pseudonym, to help raise math scores in Title I schools.

Jane, a pseudonym, has taught lower elementary for 14 years. Her Bachelors degree was from a small, regional university in the western part of the state and the Masters completed at a small, regional university in the northern part of the state. All of her teaching experience has been at Dean Elementary.

### Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of selected classroom teachers regarding student mobility within one highly mobile elementary school.

Chapter 3 explained the methodology used in collecting data and further provided the process used in selecting the research location, the 4 participants, and outline of the study. A case study approach was used to examine what issues selected elementary school teachers encountered as they provided instruction to a highly mobile classroom student population. The constant comparative method of qualitative research was used for this study. Data was collected

from the four participants through an interview guided by a set of questions. Fieldnotes were taken during the interview. Audio tapes were made during the interview and transcripts made shortly after each interview. The transcripts were shared with the participants to allow them the opportunity to clarify responses. None chose to change the original transcript responses. Analysis of the data centered on finding common answers to specific interview questions. The common answers were developed into themes and responses were again reviewed against those identified themes.

The study began with a review of related literature. Interview questions were developed as interest was generated from the literature review. The interviews were completed during September, 2003. Data analysis was completed by the end of November, 2003.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of selected teachers toward transient (mobile) students in a chosen school. The interview phase of the study was conducted within the late months of 2003 (September and October) and concluded prior to the end of the calendar year. The results of the study might provide insight and understanding into the challenges and issues facing teachers and schools that have a higher than normal student entry and withdrawal rate.

A qualitative case study approach was used to uncover the attitudes and challenges that teachers face in an elementary school in Northeast Georgia that has a history of high mobility.

The research questions that guided the study include:

1. What is the relationship between student mobility and academic performance?
2. What do teachers think of transient student's education abilities, performance and prior education training?
3. What can be done to effectively prepare schools and teachers for a highly mobile student population?

To address these questions, the researcher collected data using a qualitative case study method and the symbolic interactionism method of data analysis. Data sources included a semi-structured interview session with each participant, fieldnotes taken during the interviews and

from the review of the written transcripts of the interviews, and prior relevant research in the area of student mobility and performance.

This chapter reports the findings first as individual cases and then as data aggregated by common themes.

### Content of Dean Elementary School

Dean Elementary School is located in the south suburban area surrounding Green City, the largest municipality in Lake County, a pseudonym. The southern portion of the county has been viewed as more transient than other portions of the county; a phenomenon that has increased dramatically in the past five years. It was chosen for this study because it is within the geographic area in which the researcher lives and works which made collection of data more available. Dean Elementary is one of 20 elementary schools serving Lake County. All of the elementary schools serve grades Kindergarten through 5th grade. In a few locations that have the classroom space, a state-funded Pre-Kindergarten program operates as well. It should be noted that a second school system operates in Lake County. Its organization and geographic boundaries serve the residents of Green City. However, there are students attending the City School System that do not live in the city. A non-resident is allowed to attend by paying a tuition fee equivalent to the amount of taxes spent by the system in educating one child. Students who live within the city boundaries are not allowed to attend a Lake County school without special permission from the governing board. Parents must request a waiver from the board policy on attendance and justify the request through hardship or medical need.

Dean Elementary serves 635 students with 44 classroom teachers and specialists (art, music, physical education, ESOL), 8 of which are bilingual. The school maintains a teacher-

pupil ratio of 18:1. The faculty is considered to have a strong connection to the school and community although the percentage of teachers leaving the school has increased the past three years. Teacher turn over (which includes retirements) have increased the past three years from 6% to a high of 27%. The average teaching experience for the faculty was 15 years. Of the 635 students, there was a racially diverse composition of 365 Hispanic, 179 White, 62 Black, 14 Multi Racial, 5 Asian, and 2 American Indian. There were 336 girls and 298 boys in the school at the onset of the study. The student's record of average daily attendance, based on the first month enrollment data, was 97%.

Another reason Dean Elementary was chosen as the site for this study was because of its history of high mobility. Although the student transience figures have shown a steady reduction over the past five years, the percentage of students who enter and withdraw during the school year continues near the 50% mark. This is much lower than the 78% transience figures recorded five years ago yet far higher than the transience rates reported at the other Lake County elementary schools.

Dean Elementary provides special services to eligible students. At the time of the study, 26% of the students were served by the federal Migrant Education Program, 8% served by Special Education and 2% served by the state Gifted Education program. Examination of meeting records from the Student Support Team (SST) show 174 referrals were made with 27 students being referred for further evaluation by the special education department. Over 75% of Dean's students qualify for free/reduced meals at school, based on the October 2002 FTE count.

The participants in the study have a number of years service in teaching. Because of this veteran status, they were viewed as a constant in a fluctuating community and were interviewed

to share their insights on a multitude of mobility issues including the relationship between mobility and classroom environment, mobility and instruction, and mobility and parental support. Selecting a representative sample of veteran teachers provided an opportunity to obtain detailed descriptions of the teacher's perspectives and provided a greater understanding of what instructional adaptations are needed to instruct a highly mobile student population.

### Individual Cases

This first section provides findings across the four participants as individual cases. An overview of the participants, four elementary level teachers, along with personal information is presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1  
Overview of Participants

| Teacher | Age   | Race and Gender | Certification and Experience | Grades Taught     | # Schools Taught In |
|---------|-------|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Barbara | 40-50 | Wh/Fem          | MED-T5/7yrs.                 | 3-4, 4, 5, Kdg    | 1                   |
| Ellie   | 30-40 | Wh/Fem          | MED-T5/10yrs.                | 4, 3              | 3                   |
| Jane    | 30-40 | Wh/Fem          | MED-T5/14yrs.                | 1, Kdg, SIA       | 1                   |
| Gina    | 40-50 | Wh/Fem          | MED-T5/20yrs.                | 3, 1-2, 2-3, Math | 1                   |

#### Jane

Jane has been teaching at Dean Elementary School her entire 14 year career. After completing a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education in a small West Georgia University, she took her first job teaching in 1<sup>st</sup> Grade at Dean Elementary. After teaching in the newly developed SIA (Special Instructional Assistance) Program serving Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup>

Grade for an additional year, Jane entered Graduate School at a local small university and completed requirements for the Master's in Education (MED) in Early Childhood Education. She has been teaching Kindergarten for the past 12 years.

Fourteen themes were identified from the initial interview with Jane. While many of the themes emerged from open ended questions in the interview, Jane easily volunteered stories and information that established themes on her own. There were five themes that dealt with teacher perceptions, four themes that deals with student perceptions, three themes dealing with parents, and two themes dealing with the school. Table 4.2 shows the themes that emerged from the research interview as each question was posed.

Jane likened her classroom to a family. She talked frequently of personal feelings toward her students and of the social aspects of education. In discussing students which move in or move out of her classroom, Jane continually pointed to the adjustments needed for the teacher, for the transient student, and for the other students of the classroom. She expressed concern for getting to know the transient child as quickly as possible.

“It’s an adjustment for the teacher. It’s trying to figure out what they’ve done and what I need to get ‘em caught up. I give them some time just to...get used to the classroom and me and to watch how they do things. You struggle for a while trying to figure out what they’ve done at the previous school or schools, and where are they now and where do I need to get them to. Sometimes, you see behavior problems because they get bounced around so much they don’t know how to fit in. So, they act out. Sometimes, you get that shy, quiet child who just doesn’t feel like they fit in, so they withdraw from everything.”

When a child moves away from her classroom and Jane is aware of this move ahead of time, she tries to make the move easier on the student and the school.

“I try to make sure I get everything together. You know, even extra art work they have done so they can take that with them, and supplies just so the new teacher can get it. I try to get as much stuff together for the kid as I can so they can leave feeling good about it.”

Table 4.2  
Themes Emerging from Jane's Interview

| Research Question  | Themes   |
|--|--|
| What is your definition of a transient student?  | Teacher Perceptions  |
| How does student mobility affect your classroom?   | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School                      |
| What do you think is the most challenging aspect in dealing with transient students?                                 | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School; Student Perceptions |
| Does your school perform intake testing on new students who enroll?  | School   |
| What role do student records have in placement of transient (mobile) students?                                       | Teacher Perception;<br>Parents; School                       |
| How important is the parent's role in the success of mobile students?  | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School                      |
| How can teachers help minimize the negative moving from one school to another? Parents                               | Teacher Perceptions; impact of                               |
| Is there a difference in the effect of transiency on upper and lower elementary students? Which is more significant? | Teacher Perceptions;<br>School                               |
| What advice can you give from your experiences with transient students?  | Teacher Perceptions  |

Above all, Jane lets the student know that moving away is a very personal situation.

“If a child is leaving you, make sure they know that you love them no matter what, and that you care for them, and you're going to look out for them as best you can even though they're not with you any more.”



Jane also tries to keep in touch with students who move. The use of available communications combined with personal efforts help.

“We corresponded through email through her teacher for a while that year. We sent letters and her mom worked at the hospital, so we saw her on a field trip and checked in. Any time I see somebody that I had a connection with I try to keep in touch.”

In determining the “best” time a student can move in to or out of a classroom, Jane pondered the situation more from a social point of view. She responded,

“I think the move effects the kid more so later in the year, than in the fall part of the year. They come in easier in the fall. In the spring, you already have that family relationship with your class and they don’t always fit right in. I don’t think it’s as bad in kindergarten or lower grades possibly, as upper grades because I know it’s a lot harder to fit in and make friends the older you get. In kindergarten they all pretty much love everybody. In the fall of the year, that’s the best because then, you really have them for most of the year. If it has to be later, I would say right after Christmas because you still have a big chunk of the year left.”

As far as academically, Jane focused on school records as an essential element in getting to know the child as quickly as possible and of possible “learning gaps” from moving from school to school.

“Not getting your information fast enough....so you knew exactly what you’re getting”, seemed to be a big concern. “Every school does not do everything exactly the same. I may be teaching “A” and somebody else is teaching “J”, so did they already get “A” or do I need to go back and recover. You may have missed something somewhere along the way, because you may have already taught that area and then they miss it completely.”

Jane has learned not to depend on student records for all her information on the transient student. “I try to work with my kids one-on-one during nap time and center time. I would try to pull them aside and do things like that to give them some extra attention on what they’re lacking.”

In responding to questions about parents, Jane was very firm on her convictions in this area. “I feel like the parents are always a huge importance to the kids and the school.” But,

within Deal Elementary, Jane has concerns over the honesty of the parents and their willingness to become involved with their child's education. "At this school, most of the parents are non-English speaking, and ...they're not that concerned, especially if they're moving around. They just come in, drop their kids off at the new school and go on about their day." The ideal parent would make efforts to find out what is going on and provide assistance to the teacher. "If they came in and met the teacher, asked what kinds of things are you working on in your classroom....these are some of the things my child has already learned....can you give me anything at I can do at home to catch them up, or things they're going to miss out on."

But during the course of the interview, Jane realized that as a teacher, she was probably not doing enough to involve the parents. "I do parent conferences but usually I do them right after GKAP results come in and I can get everybody in, so unless they come in during that time, they probably get missed." As far as initiating parent conferences, Jane admits: "...that's a failure on my part. I don't just sit down and schedule a conference just so we can talk about that. But, that's something I should do."

Placement of new students into classrooms is the school's responsibility. Often it falls on the school secretary who registers the student. The process used is to give the new student to the teacher that has the lowest enrollment numbers at the current time, without regard to specific needs or concerns. But, Jane would like for the school to be more proactive in providing useful information on new students.

"It would be nice if when a child comes in, since you don't always have the records right there, if they could call a school and have something faxed, some kind of information sheet, so that they know more about them and how to place them. You might already have 8 behavior problems in your room and here comes another one and you've got the lowest number so you're gonna get 'em. It might be best if they do things like that."

Gina

Gina has 20 years of teaching experience, all at Dean Elementary School. She first attended a small, local college before completing requirements for the Bachelors and Masters Degrees from a small, regional university. She taught thirteen years in grade 3, three years in various multi-age classrooms, supervised the school's math lab for three years and is currently the Math Coach, a new position established by the Lake County School District to improve student test scores in the area of mathematics.

There were 12 themes identified from Gina's interview. There were six themes that fit the teacher perception category, two themes each for student perception and parents, and one theme each in the area of school and school system. Table 4.3 shows the emergent themes from each interview question posed to Gina in the initial interview.

Gina displayed an unusually knowledgeable grasp of transient students. She was concerned for the personal well-being of the child, and at the same time, conscious of the difficulties posed to the teacher's classroom and the school. The first question set the stage for the rest of the interview. When asked how many times a child has to move before being considered a transient student, her answer was direct,

"I would say if a child moves more than once." When allowed to elaborate, Gina continued: "I had a child last year, and they moved in here when she was in first grade, and then they moved after her fourth grade year but her father was in the military, but that would still be considered a transient student."

After thinking about this response, Gina added: "You know a lot of times we think of a transient student, we think more of people who move for economic reasons." But her train of thought, when answering the open ended questions, clearly pointed to other reasons students may move.

Table 4.3  
Themes Emerging from Gina's Interview

| Research Question  | Themes   |
|--|--|
| What is your definition of a transient student?  | Teacher Perceptions  |
| How does student mobility affect your classroom?   | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School                      |
| What do you think is the most challenging aspect in dealing with transient students?                                 | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School; Student Perceptions |
| Does your school perform intake testing on new students who enroll?  | School   |
| What role do student records have in placement of transient (mobile) students?                                       | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School                      |
| How important is the parent's role in the success of mobile students?  | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School                      |
| How can teachers help minimize the negative impact of moving from one school to another?                             | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents                              |
| Is there a difference in the effect of transiency on upper and lower elementary students? Which is more significant? | Teacher Perceptions;<br>School                               |
| What advice can you give from your experiences with transient students?  | Teacher Perceptions  |

Gina showed a concern for the emotional state of the transient student and the social aspect of mobility. When questioned about the effect on the classroom, the first theme discussed was the social aspect as to how it affects those students that lose a classmate.

“Usually when a student leaves, the class kind of goes through withdrawal cause they miss them. It's their friends and they miss their playmates and they miss their reading buddies and those kind of things. It's like losing a family member I guess for them.”

When responding to the question of what she does to help with the adjustment for transient students, Gina was equally concerned for the social as well as the academic aspect of mobility. When a student moves in to Gina's classroom, there are specific things she does to help the child adjust. "I spend a lot of one on one time with them." This personal time serves two purposes. First, it serves a social/emotional purpose because the student feels a part of the class right away. "I give the child a few days to get acclimated. During those two days I get to know the child personally." Gina further enhances the social atmosphere for the new student by assigning an existing student to partner with them.

"I usually try to give them a buddy, you know, have somebody that's in my room be a buddy to the new person and let them take them on a tour of the school. I make them hang out with them for a few days, and they end up being really good friends."

There appears an obvious concern for the emotional effect on students. Gina tells of the Dean Elementary community and how over the years, it has become the norm to expect mobility on a frequent basis. She sees that the more a student moves, the more they get used to moving.

"It seems like our students, the older they get, the more leaving becomes more emotional, unless it's a child that does it constantly. Because they've done it their whole life because rent was due, mother and daddy had a fight, boyfriend and mother had a fight, that kind of thing. They pretty much get used to coming and going."

By taking care of the student's personal needs first, Gina sets the stage for the second purpose, the academics.

Formal academic assessment is not a part of the registration process at Dean Elementary School nor is it useful in Gina's individual classroom. Her method of assessing new students is to evaluate based on performance on individual assignments given to all students in the class.

"There are assignments that we do. If it's something they've already covered, they will tell you that. If there are gaps, they're harder to pick up and you have to spend more time with them."

When a student is moving out of Gina's class, there are things she does to help the new teacher at the new school. She tries to find out where the child is moving, first by talking with the child. If the child can provide information on the new school, Gina tries to contact that school. "I usually try to contact the other school and as soon as they register, have that teacher call me if they have any questions or just to talk."

Gina frequently mentioned school records. Her response to questions and her bringing up student records several times indicates a belief in the importance of student information. "As a classroom teacher, they are very important because as soon as I got them, I could see where they have been. I can see the expectations of the teacher they had before, and how the child performed as far as the teacher's expectations." So, when a child is moving away, Gina makes sure ..".they have a withdrawal form, and the grades are on it", so some current academic information is provided.

Too often at Dean Elementary, the transient student simply "disappears" from school. Parents frequently do not follow withdrawal procedures and teachers are not aware of a withdrawal until days later when attempts to contact the parents bring information from neighbors or relatives that they have left the area. Even so, Gina has a special feeling for these students.

"If I have a child that leaves and I don't know it, and they just don't come back, I try to find them and make sure any personal things they have get to them. Because, I just can't stand to throw them away."

The interview with Gina produced two important factors that she feels influences the success of transient students. Those factors are the attitude of the teacher, and the parents. She suggests for the teacher to be patient with any new student, give them time to adjust to new

surroundings and to accept new classmates and a new teacher. Gina shares her personal observations of new students being brought to a new classroom.

“I think the thing that over the years that I have seen that was the most disappointing was when they came to you and said you’ve got a new student and the teacher’s face would go.....like the teacher would show facial expressions of being upset or they would sigh or something like that, you know, not another one.”

Gina feels that every new student should feel wanted and accepted in order to provide them the atmosphere to be successful. Even though teachers may have a legitimate feeling of frustration or anxiety in dealing with frequent mobility, “when that child shows up in your room, act like it’s the greatest thing in the world....that you’re so glad they’re there.”

The parent is the second important factor. In Gina’s opinion “the parent can make it an easier process or the parent can make it scary.” With further elaboration, Gina tells of how parents need to talk with the child about moving. The child should not believe that the move is due to anything they had any control over. They should also allow them to say goodbye to friends and classmates and to establish contacts for future communications. “If the parent provides that kind of information or provides help for that child to have connections with the children that they have left, or the teachers they left, they don’t feel like they’re just ripped away from it.”

Gina is one of two participants who mentions an International School that is part of the Lake County School District. While she is aware of its existence, she is unsure of its purpose or what services are provided. When talking about the International School, Gina provided her insight as:

“I know we’ve sent people over there to register but to say I’ve been there and know what else they do. There’s probably a lot they do. I wish I did know but I don’t. I had contact with them this year about videos or parent resources for some of my parents and they do have some of that.”

It appears the International School offers assistance in registering students whose parents are non-English speakers. Lake County does not do a good job of explaining the services of the International Center. Most teachers in the system know there is one, but don't know what it does.

Barbara

Barbara has the least teaching experience of the four participants but shows the same concerns and ability to work with transient students. Her 7 years of teaching experience are all at Dean Elementary School but she has changed grade levels 3 times, beginning in intermediate grades and now teaching at the primary level. She earned a BSEd in Social Studies from a large in-state university. Her teacher training, and the completion of requirements for the MEd are from a local university.

Ten themes were identified in Barbara's interview. There were five themes that dealt with teacher perceptions, two dealing with student perceptions, and one each dealing with parents, the school, and the school system. Table 4.4 shows the themes that emerged from Barbara's initial interview as each question was posed to her.

Barbara's answers and stories shared during the interview showed a resolve that mobility is a constant at Dean Elementary School and would continue to be. At Dean Elementary, Barbara feels that "its kind of a fact of life. You can't change it and you can't fight it." It is her suggestion that teachers prepare ahead of time for new students because; "you know they're coming and I think it really kind of helps the kid and even the parents" to be prepared for them. Her preparation includes extra folders that contain school registration information and forms that sometimes are not returned to the school by the parents.



Table 4.4  
Themes Emerging from Barbara's Interview

| Research Question  | Themes                                  |
|--|---|
| What is your definition of a transient student?  | Teacher Perceptions                     |
| How does student mobility affect your classroom?   | Teacher Perceptions                     |
| What do you think is the most challenging aspect in dealing with transient students?                                 | Teacher Perceptions;<br>School          |
| Does your school perform intake testing on new students who enroll?  | School                                  |
| What role do student records have in placement of transient (mobile) students?                                       | Teacher Perceptions;<br>Parents; School |
| How important is the parent's role in the success of mobile students?  | Parents                                 |
| How can teachers help minimize the negative impact of moving from one school to another?                             | Teacher Perceptions                     |
| Is there a difference in the effect of transiency on upper and lower elementary students? Which is more significant? | Teacher Perceptions;<br>School          |
| What advice can you give from your experiences with transient students?  | Teacher Perceptions                     |

When talking about students that move in or move out of a classroom, Barbara described it as “disruptive” to the routine of the classroom and to the students themselves.

She explained that the dynamics of the classroom can be changed with the addition or withdrawal of just one child. “It takes time for the students you’ve already had to get used to the new student” because “the class almost becomes like a family.”

To further the emphasis on the aspect of mobility, Barbara feels that the most challenging aspect of dealing with transient students is social. A buddy system is used to help orient new students to their new school and classroom routines.

“Usually, I give them about a week honeymoon period so to speak. I usually assign a mentor within my classroom that know the ropes and know what to do and I kind of introduce them to each other and kind of give that person the responsibility of helping show them how to make lunch choices, how to sign out to go to the bathroom, you know all those daily type things and then I would sit down usually with the child during break time and explain rules.”

There’s also a concern for the academic ability of new students. Barbara voices the same concerns as other participants in this research that the teacher is mainly responsible for assessing the ability of new students. “You have to find out where the student is. You have to kind of go through a series of not necessarily paper and pencil tests, but things to find out where are you”?

With the adjustments necessary for new students, Barbara uses mainly informal observations to assess a new student’s ability. She indicates that “at first, it’s mainly observation.” By watching them perform assignments given to all students, listening to them read, looking at their handwriting, “over the course of a week you could pick up on a lot of things that they were familiar with or weren’t familiar with.”

Student records were also a concern for Barbara. “None of them come with records in hand so you’ve got to wait for records.” But, she is resolved to the fact that some records will never come. She refers to a domino effect,

“if they have moved so often the records never catch up, you know the kid may be on the fourth move, the records may still be between school one and school two and they’ll eventually get to school three but by the time they get to school three to come to school four it’s the end of the school year and somewhere addresses get changed, things get returned.”

But, she does hold the belief that school records are important but “you can’t make roofs without straw.” So, Barbara suggests that “if somehow we had electronic records nationally, or at least some system that was better than what we’ve got now, you wouldn’t have these gaps.”

When referring to a perfect system, Barbara does not think there is one. Her feelings are that “the perfect thing is for the child to come in Kindergarten, never move, and stay all the way through twelfth grade” in order to prevent social and academic problems in students.

One important factor that effects whether mobility is negative or positive is the parents.

“It depends on how sensitive they are to their children in the moving. Some parents, like a military family that move a lot, they know they’re going to move so they’re sensitive to their child’s need so they try to plan and make accommodations for that. But then, some parents are just trying to hold it together.”

Teachers, too can have a huge impact on mobile students. The first challenge to the teacher is to establish communication with the home. Barbara prefers to meet the parent as the child registers in school. “Our school secretaries have been really good when they bring them to the door and introduce them. And that helps. If they are non-English speaking, I usually get the Parent Liaison to call them and set up a meeting.” She admits that not all attempts to meet with parents are successful. The key to her success is flexibility in meeting with parents on their schedule.

“I’ve been over here at 6:30 in the morning to have a conference with a daddy...so he didn’t have to miss work because he couldn’t afford to miss work. So you have to be willing to do whatever it takes.”

Barbara also feels that if a child is going to move, earlier in the year is better “because the social dynamics of the class is not as ingrained as they are later in the year. The first month of school we’re kind of reviewing what they had in the previous grade.”

Ellie

Ellie has taught in two other school systems so her perspective on mobility at Dean Elementary can be compared to other schools. She received her BSEd and MEd at a regional state university and teaches 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at Dean Elementary. She has a total of 10 years teaching experience in the classroom. She has also taught at the Middle School level in a special education classroom.

Ellie identifies ten themes from the initial interview. Five were of the teacher perceptions theme, one from the student perceptions, two from parents, and one from the school. Table 4.5 shows the themes that emerged from Ellie's research interview.

In defining a transient student, Ellie could not settle on a definition that suited all mobility situations. She chose to provide her interpretation of two different kinds of transient students.

“I have one group of transient students that have very unstable home lives and that's the reason they are moving around. The other type is a student who is moving because the dad has a job that sends him on his way.”

Ellie continued with an emphasis on economic situations controlling the mobility decisions of her students.

“When I say move a lot for some kids, they're moving every few months. Because they move into a situation, they don't pay the rent, they stay there until they're evicted. Economic moves. I don't see any other kind of moves except for that.”

The decision to move is predominately made by the parents based on the shaky economic situation they are in. Ellie does not see a change coming about. “I see parents who are either uneducated themselves and have to take the lowest paying jobs, have mental problems or learning problems themselves.....” These societal problems are

passed down through the children; “the kids come in with learning problems, too”, according to Ellie.

Table 4.5  
Themes Emerging from Ellie’s Interview

| Research Question  | Themes                               |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| What is your definition of a transient student?  | Teacher Perceptions                  |
| How does student mobility affect your classroom?   | Teacher Perceptions; School          |
| What do you think is the most challenging aspect in dealing with transient students?                                 | Teacher Perceptions                  |
| Does your school perform intake testing on new students who enroll?  | School                               |
| What role do student records have in placement of transient (mobile) students?                                       | Teacher Perceptions; School          |
| How important is the parent’s role in the success of mobile students?  | Teacher Perceptions; Parents; School |
| How can teachers help minimize the negative impact of moving from one school to another?                             | Teacher Perceptions                  |
| Is there a difference in the effect of transiency on upper and lower elementary students? Which is more significant? | Teacher Perceptions; School          |
| What advice can you give from your experiences with transient students?  | Teacher Perceptions                  |

One additional area of the classroom that is impacted by frequent mobility is the social aspect for the students. Children are largely social and need the security of friends and peers. Ellie sees a great discrepancy between transient students and their more stable classmates. She uses a variety of cooperative learning strategies in her

classroom. This is accomplished only when her students can pull together as a learning unit. Mobile students present a problem for this type of instruction. “By the time that child gets in and becomes a part of the community, a part of our group, starting to participate fully, then they’re pulled out again.”

Frequent moves also effect the individual student. Rather than a new student making efforts to be accepted by class peers or giving a best effort, Ellie finds that more often than not, mobile students hold back for one reason or another. While this is a matter of attitude, it is one that is not easily overcome by a teacher.

“It’s just a difficult thing for them to come in and hit the ground running. Most of the time, they want to lag back, and wait....and they know....how long are they going to be here? If they’ve moved eight or nine times already and school just started, they know they’re not going to be here very long. So, why should they put their time and energy and effort into something that they’re not going to see the gain from. Motivation for the teacher is very tough.”

Learning gaps are evident in mobile students. But, Ellie has a differing philosophy of why. In the other participant interviews, teachers felt that students missed instruction due to schools not teaching the same things at the same time. Ellie believes there may be other reasons. “They have huge gaps in their knowledge and I’m not sure whether the gap is because they’ve missed it when they were in other schools, or are they just struggling to be able to do it.” Because you don’t normally have enough background information on the new student, it is truly an assumption on the part of the teacher to assign a cause for lack of performance.

Transient students have a special friend in Ellie. As a dedicated teacher, her feelings go beyond the classroom. When asked the most challenging part of dealing with a transient student, her answers were again social in nature. “I worry a lot about my

transient students because I worry about whether or not they have what they need.” Ellie admits to purchasing food and necessities for previous students because of her concern for their physical well being as well as their intellectual training.

As with other participants, Ellie does not have a formal assessment procedure for new students that enter her classroom during the year. She feels that it only takes a day or two to know what performance level the new student is capable of. That is accomplished with her own form of evaluation. “I try to work where they’re at. I work a whole group, then I work in small group, and when I put kids in small groups, I pull back individuals to work with. I assess every day.” This is not only with the new student either. Ellie makes sure all students receive individual attention and low level students are pulled for individual sessions. While Ellie does believe that student records are important, she relays that “I’m glad the records don’t come when they do because it gives me a chance to do some assessing on my own.”

Ellie admits that it is often two or three weeks in getting permanent records on students moving into the school during the year. The value of the records lie in placement for special services and remedial programs. Without formal testing or verification of eligibility for academic programs, Ellie has to start over with the placement process which takes a long time. Often the child will move again before a referral makes it through the established process.

Parents are naturally defensive of their children. If there are learning problems or behavior concerns, this information is often not shared when enrolling in a new school. Ellie believes this is because:

“You see the best in your child and you want everybody else to see the best in your child. They want their kid to have a good year. I have never seen a parent that didn’t want the best for their kid.”

This is evident even to the point of not being totally honest when talking to the teacher about the new student.

A classroom pal is also invaluable in the beginning. Ellie relies on a classmate to befriend a new student to show them the routines and expectations for the class. Once the pal spends about a week with the new student, they are familiar with the locations of the various parts of the building, knows and understands the routine classroom chores and homework expectations.

When a child is known to be facing a move away from Dean Elementary, Ellie involves the entire class in certain preparations.

“We always make a book. They all get to do a page. I always do pictures, a group picture and a picture of that child and we always put our address in it. We try to stay in touch because these kids need the touch.”

Ellie’s comments reaffirmed her belief that older students suffer more from changing schools than do younger students.

“I think the younger children form bonds faster. I think it’s easier for them to go into a new situation, because they see the teacher as Mom. My older kids have a more difficult time because they’re coming in at a time when all these kids are starting to decide what their clique is going to be...who they’re going to be with. This is a bad time for kids to have to lose their close friends.”

The teacher’s attitude is essential to the success of mobile students. While many of them carry baggage that works against their ability to be accepted by peers, it is the teacher that must insure an opportunity for all. The teacher must establish a sense of belonging by whatever means is necessary. By taking control of each individual situation, and not leaving “fitting in” to chance, the teacher helps insure success for the mobile student and the class.



Ellie states,

“I think the most important thing for a teacher in dealing with the toughest kids, the most unlovable kids a lot of times, is to love those kids. They have a lot of problems, the parents have a lot of problems, sometimes the kids take care of the parents, sometimes the kids are not taken care of at all.”

The teacher must establish a sense of belonging by whatever means is necessary.

### Case Findings

From an assessment of the individual perspectives of the four participants, the researcher looked for data across cases to find common themes to give further credence to the research findings. The examination of data yielded four major areas in which themes emerged. These themes included 1) the teacher’s perception of how mobility affects the classroom; 2) the effect of mobility on students 3) the parent’s role in mobility; and 4) the school’s practices and procedures in students transfers.

### Teacher’s Perceptions

#### Definition of Mobility

All four participants provided a definition of mobility. When pressed to assign a number of school changes that would, in their individual opinion, lead to the label of “mobile” status, there was a varied response from one move to multiple moves within one year to multiple moves over the course of an elementary school career. While the definitions were not the same, each participant had similar ideas as to what mobility was in this school. Each also indicated that some student moves occur that would preclude being assigned a “transient” label, such as children of military families. Barbara offered in her interview that, “a military family....move a lot (but) they know they’re going to move so they’re sensitive to their child’s needs.” Jane explained that in some cases “families just move, they’ll buy a new house or something.” When

a child moves from one school to another during the school term, the mobility tag is usually placed on that child. Should a school move occur during the summer months while school is not in session, mobility is not generally considered an issue for these participants.

Mobile students are generally perceived as coming from unstable homes, with parents that are not involved in their child's education. However, the participants in this study did not agree with that perception. Each felt that parents of mobile students cared greatly about their child and wanted the best for them. Because of circumstances they had no control of, such as job changes, rent due in trying economic times, and other economic situations, parents were forced to spend more time and thought on those personal issues rather than school related concerns.

#### Learning Gaps

Each participant felt it very important to assess a new student's abilities as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. While recognizing this is a "disruption" to the classroom routines, it was nonetheless critical to having new students fit into the cohesive nature of the classroom. In providing information about where new student's fit in the classroom, Ellie adds, "I struggle for a while trying to figure out what they've done at the previous school or schools, and you know, where they are now and where do I need to get them."

To not assess a new student's abilities and performance level was never a consideration because it was necessary to include this new student as quickly as possible in the classroom's daily routines. Barbara added, "what fourth graders in Georgia learn is totally different from fourth graders in Arkansas." All four participants used some form of cooperative learning techniques in the classroom. To be successful, cooperative learning is based on each student being an active part of the learning process. Without knowing the capability of a new student, it becomes harder to perform along with others in the class.

Sometimes, motivation of the student is seen as a problem. During the interview, Ellie stated, “when they’re in an unstable home situation, it makes it harder for them to compete with everyone else.” All participants saw motivation as a hardship because some students will not put forth full effort because transiency appears to be the norm in their school experience. They don’t know how long they will be at the new school, so “why try”, according to Ellie.

#### Most Challenging Area in Dealing with Mobile Students

The one area that each of the four participants did not agree on was when asked to name the most challenging part of dealing with transient students. Barbara felt that the social aspect of the student was most important. She felt that it was most important to have the new student feel a part of the classroom as soon as possible. To help with this process, she assigns a “buddy” who is given the responsibility of helping show the daily routines and explain the rules of behavior and performance. After about a week or two, the newness has worn off and the teacher can focus on assessing the student’s ability.

Gina felt the most challenging part is the academic progress. A student that enrolls is expected to pick up from the point of entry and perform adequately. To be fair in this process, it is necessary to find out what the student is capable of, to find any learning gaps. Gina does this by spending a lot of one-on-one time with the new student. Her feelings about the students at Dean Elementary were such that they are used to new students coming in and they adjust quickly. As a matter of routine, they tend to expect new students throughout the school year and serve a positive role in the classroom process.

Ellie lists a new student’s personal needs as her most difficult part of dealing with transient students. Most of the mobile students new to Dean Elementary are in the low economic category. For a student to function appropriately, the basic needs of food and clothing must be

first met. While this is the responsibility of the parent, teachers at Dean Elementary also take on this responsibility in some cases. Ellie shared a story of how one child entered school in mid-Winter and only had short sleeve shirts and sandals. Through the Parent Coordinator, suitable clothes and even food for the family were provided by the teachers of Dean Elementary.

Jane listed the lack of student records as her most challenging area. To fully assess a new student's ability, she feels it necessary to be able to review past records of performance as quickly as possible after enrollment. By not getting information in a timely manner, classroom instructional time is lost in the review process or in finding out at what level a student is able to adequately perform.

### The School's Practices and Procedures in Student Transfers

#### Process of Enrollment/Student Records

The procedure to enroll new students into Dean Elementary is lacking forethought and concern for the teacher, the classroom, and the student. Jane questioned the school secretary as to the procedure for enrolling new students. She stated that,

“When a child comes in they just put them in a classroom of the teacher with the lowest number at that time. They don't have any of the stuff to go by. They said sometimes they will make a call if there's a question about grade placement or retention. But other than that, they go to the teacher with the lowest numbers.”

According to all four participants, this practice is well known at Dean Elementary. A new student is assigned to the classroom solely on which class has the smallest number of existing students. No attempts are made to assess a new student's ability nor are cumulative records, report of academic performance, or proof of the grade level (other than chronological age) required upon enrollment. When a new student is enrolled at Dean Elementary, it is a random act that places that student in a grade appropriate classroom based on information supplied by the

parent at the time of enrollment. In some instances, information provided by the parent is not accurate or it is later found that a student needs remedial services not available in the initial placement classroom. This leads to a move to yet a different classroom within the school once written records are received from previous schools or pertinent information becomes available.

Student records are seldom available immediately. Barbara stated that “none of them come with records in hand, so you’ve got to wait for records.” Ellie added that sometimes it “takes two or three weeks to find out what programs they have been in or what kind of help they’ve been getting.” Jane felt strongly that student records were an essential element needed by the classroom teacher. She stated that “if they come with all their stuff, all their baggage, so to speak, and you knew exactly what you’re getting, to help a child.”

#### The International School

The Lake County School District provides an International School for students coming directly from a foreign country or from a home where a language other than English is spoken. The International Center assists with interpreting between the school and parents and assesses student’s language in anticipation of this being a barrier to his/her learning in a regular school setting. It is not clear if the International School provides instruction directly to students. Gina has had more contact with the International School than the other participants. Even so, she is not fully versed in their purpose or comfortable in knowing what they do. During her interview, she referred to the International School by saying:

“I know we’ve sent people over there to register and I know we’ve got information from kids who have registered, but to ever say I’ve been there and know what else they do, cause I’m sure they do other things, because I had contact with them this year about videos or parent resources for some of my parents and they do have some of that. There’s probably a lot they do.”

## Parent's Role in Mobility

All participants felt the parent of a mobile child is one of the more important factors in the successful transition to a new school. If a parent shows sensitivity to the move, a child is better prepared and more willingly accepts the move as necessary. If the parents let the child know of an impending move, informs the teacher prior to a move occurring, and provides insight into the purpose of the move, the child is more apt to accept the move and try to make it a positive experience. It also allows the classroom teacher an opportunity to better prepare the student for a move. Gina was more personal in her feelings toward knowing ahead of time about a student that will be leaving her class. She said, "...once they're mine, I always want to know what they're doing. I've done pen pals....I encourage them to come back. At the end of the year, I still couldn't throw it (child's personal belongings) away."

Each participant wanted to meet the parent when a new student enrolled and felt that any additional information the parent could provide would be helpful. Jane said that parents can "give you a lot of insight." However, the enrollment practice of Dean Elementary does not require the parent to meet the teacher but the opportunity is provided. If the parent chooses to meet the teacher, this provides a chance for the teacher to lay the groundwork for future parent-teacher conferences. And, as Barbara explains, "you can get a glimpse at maybe what you're beginning to deal with....that first five minute little greeting that you meet that child and the parent at the door."

## The Effect of Mobility on Students

### Emotional Anxiety

Moving from one school to another usually creates an emotional response for children. Not only is there new surroundings, there are new classmates, a new teacher and new routines to learn. The student's perception of a move to a new school can vary with the addition of other factors such as how involved the parents are in setting the stage for a move, the number of times a student has previously been involved in moving to another school, and the age and maturity of the child.

As stated previously, if the parents explain the move as necessary and encourage the move as a positive step, the student is likely to try harder to make the move a success.

However, the participants saw the age of the child as a contributing factor to success. The older the child, the more difficult a move is for social reasons. Older students have a more difficult time parting with friends and in making new friends. Ellie stated that "kids that are friends now will be friends from now through Middle School. This is a bad time for kids to have to lose their close friends." The other research participants in this study found that the younger child was more flexible in meeting new classmates and helping new students in the adjustment process. Ellie further stated that "younger children tend to form bonds faster and it's easier for them to go into a new situation." Gina supports this belief in that "it seems like our students, the older they get, the leaving becomes more emotional, unless it's a child that does it constantly."

### Advice to New Teachers

As a closure to the interviews, each participant was asked to provide advice to a beginning teacher that was hypothetically employed at Dean Elementary School as their first teaching job.

Not surprisingly, the answers were similar in nature. Each teacher focused on the child and the emotional need to connect with each one.

Ellie suggested that “the most important thing is to love those kids. I try to make them feel good about being here. I want them to come every day. I want them to want to come. And I think that’s the most important thing to do, is to feel accepted, to feel loved, to feel like what they’re doing is important.”

Gina offers the advice to “be patient. Regardless of how you feel or what you think, when that child shows up at your room and that parent shows up at your room, act like it’s the greatest thing in the world, that you’re so glad they’re there.”

Jane repeated the recommendation of Ellie. She said that “when a child comes in, be there to greet them and accept them and love them just like anybody else in your classroom.”

The final advice comes from Barbara. Her suggestion is to “be flexible. Know its going to happen.”

### Chapter Summary

From these interviews, it is evident that each participant exhibits a great deal of pride in the teaching profession and in working daily with children, even those who don’t have the advantage of stability in their lives. A love for children is evident and a dedication to teaching all children is central to their daily teaching routines. It is further evident that each participant has pride in Dean Elementary School and in the Lake County School District. They are resolved to the fact that the student population will continue to change and their role in this process is to be there for the students by providing them with the best opportunity to learn, to grow, and to fit in with those children already a part of a school.



As proof of this feeling, Ellie shared a personal insight into one of her transient students.

She stated,

“Because of all the moves, she had a lot of information, a lot of knowledge. She was very resilient. And, one of these days she’s going to be the head of a huge corporation because, even though she was transient, the parent’s made sure all her needs were met and she was on level with everyone else and when she came in she was comfortable because she knew the things the other kids knew.”

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to identify some of the issues faced by classroom teachers and their professional attitudes toward transient students. The perspectives of the classroom teacher were sought to describe the conditions surrounding students who move in or move out of their classroom within an elementary school setting. Data were examined and analyzed to determine common practices and issues relating to the mobility of students in this particular school. It is believed that wider generalities can be assumed from the data collected in this study. Answers to the following questions were the basis for the study:

1. What is the relationship between student mobility and academic performance?
2. What do teachers think of transient student's educational abilities, performance, and prior educational training?
3. What can be done to effectively prepare schools and teachers for a highly mobile student population?

A review of the research study, an overview of the research questions, and procedures used regarding practices in dealing with a mobile student population are included within this chapter. Following these areas, an explanation of why this study differs from previous studies, and the major findings from the study are discussed. Implications and recommendations are offered for schools and school systems for further consideration as a conclusion to this chapter and the research study.

## Summary of the Study

A qualitative research design and methods were used to collect and analyze data relating to the beliefs and practices of elementary school classroom teachers in dealing with a highly transient student population. Questions posed in an interview were used to direct this study and sought to establish the relationship between student mobility and academic performance. Furthermore, the study sought to uncover specific data regarding the teacher's perceptions on the definition of mobility, the practices used by the teachers in assessing, placing and teaching the mobile student, what effects transiency has on the elementary classroom, and to identify successful strategies in dealing with the mobile student.

## Procedures

Purposeful sampling was used in determining the participants of this study. With the assistance of the school district Student Services Director, one elementary school was identified as having a higher than average student entry and withdrawal rate as compared to the other elementary schools in the same district. Permission was obtained from the Superintendent of Schools and the Principal of the school selected. Participants were selected with the assistance of the school Principal. Permission to conduct the human studies research was obtained from the IRB board at the University of Georgia and the selected participants signed the consent form found in Appendix B. Interview Questions (Appendix A) were initially used. Data collection consisted of fieldnotes from the interviews, analysis of the transcriptions of the interviews, as well as a review of available artifacts.

Each interview with the participants was audio taped and transcribed. Field notes were made to guide the questioning and to explore themes uncovered during the interview. Following

each interview, the interview transcription was shared with the participant to allow corrections, clarifications, or additions to the data. Also following each interview, a review of the previous interviews by the researcher assisted in identifying common themes and practices. Final analysis revealed overall themes relating to the issues of student mobility as it relates to the classroom teacher at the elementary school level.

### Previous Studies

Limited research studies exist in the area of student mobility. In reviewing prior studies, it was found that most were quantitative studies directed at one particular population or one particular school related issue. Such issues included negative effects of mobility on student learning and performance (Brent & DiObilba, 1993; Ersing & Sutphen, 2003; Fowler & Finn, 2001; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989; Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, Larson, Ream & Palardy, 1999) or the effect on overall school and district performance (Curtin, 2002; Fitchen, 1994; Kerbow, 1996; Newman, 1966, Rumberger, 1999; Sewell, 1982; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Williams, 1996; Wood, 1993; Varlas, 2002). Some studies do exist that show an influx of students place significant constraints on the instructional approach of teachers (Vail, 1996). These studies closely align with the qualitative study conducted in this research project and the results are similar.

This study focused on the classroom teachers, using a qualitative method of data collection. Teachers are the professionals responsible for the success of the mobile student's transition between schools, the assessment of student's abilities, and for providing the meaningful instruction at a level the mobile student can show success. Previous research has largely failed to investigate the role of the teacher. The difficulties faced by the classroom

teacher and individual strategies for dealing with the transient student were addressed in this study.

With the current focus in Georgia and the nation on student performance and accountability of schools, it becomes more important to identify causes for student's lack of acceptable performance. The federal "No Child Left Behind Act" establishes a high priority in reducing the achievement gap between groups of students based on race, nationality, disability, or other identifiable factors that may effect learning. This study attempted to analyze the perspectives and issues classroom teachers encounter in their daily involvement with transient students.

#### Discussion

The teachers participating in this study were first asked to define mobility. Their responses were similar in the broad sense that students that changed schools were considered mobile. However, there was a varied response to the number of moves that would lead to a mobile labeling for the student. Participants ranged from a single move to several moves over the course of one year. Yet, in some cases, students who moved multiple times were not considered transient due to the cause of their move. Children of military families or those whose parents are moved professionally are not viewed by the participants as particularly noteworthy for further study. Also, students who withdraw or enter during the summer months when school is not in session are not considered in the endangered category. Only those students who move from one school to another during the school term, either from unstable homes or from homes where parents are not particularly involved in their child's education, are considered truly transient by the participants.

Transfer students who change schools during the course of the academic school year are a concern for most educators. These students carry a tremendous amount of personal stress, from the change in their home environment to the interruption in their learning experience. Research statistics show that mobile children 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; Ludon, 1986; Brown, 1996). Teachers in this study reaffirmed that their transient students have an unsteady foundation and weak basic skills that are magnified by the disruption in the continuity of learning which create learning gaps in their academic training.

This issue of academic performance is important to the teachers at Dean Elementary School because of the increased emphasis on teacher accountability and performance of all students to a set standard of performance on the developing Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Testing (CRCT) program. In addition, Dean Elementary is a Title I school, which is often synonymous with low performance of students. The participants of this study work with mobile students and accept the challenge of quickly integrating the newcomers into established routines so instructional time is not lost and gaps in learning do not occur. Furthermore, personal assessments are used to identify needs of the mobile student and attempts are made to fill in the gaps evident from previous lost opportunities.

Teacher comments on lack of past records and data on highly transient students were consistent. When a new student enters the school and there is no meaningful history of their educational background, teachers must start from the beginning to assess and plan for individual instruction. This causes teachers to take extra time which results in lost instructional time for all students, extra work for the teacher, and frustration in knowing their effort may be in vain since

history shows this student will likely move away before the teacher completes the necessary catching up.

The administrative procedures for enrollment and withdrawing of students at Dean Elementary School caused great anxiety for the participants. Not getting information in a timely manner and receiving transfer records that are incomplete were two concerns voiced consistently. As a result of this study, it is recommended that teachers not depend on records for all the information about a student, even if transfer records are received in a timely manner. Justification for this lack of reliance is that records are often incomplete on transfer students and otherwise confusing due to the manner in which different schools and school systems assess student progress. There is also a concern that school systems develop a curriculum that is important to their local community and may not be suited for all school locations in a general sense. As soon as students are enrolled, a process of evaluation and integration should be set in motion by the individual school or directed by the school district.

The MSRTS, the federal system that tracks migrant children, is one of the few automated record systems used in the United States. However, it is slow, incomplete and used infrequently due to the low percentage of migrant children served through this program. Few school districts are on-line so records must be go through a regional Migrant Education Office and are often lacking of essential data.

Along these same lines, California is one of a few states that have recently begun to pilot an electronic student record format called ExPRESS (GAO, 1994). It is expected to be used to transfer the records of all children, not just migrants. The format is based on common data standards for transferring student records and was developed by a group of state and local

educators with experience in information management. California officials estimate the use of these common data standards would reduce the time needed to evaluate the content of a student's record. The use of this system may also generate savings by cutting costs of record transfer by the sending school or the need for retesting by the receiving school.

Better student record systems may improve states and districts ability to determine whether children who change schools frequently are provided with the help they need. The placement of students in classrooms at Dean Elementary follows a random process. Purely by coincidence is a new student placed in an appropriate classroom. The process used at Dean Elementary is to look at the enrollment numbers of each grade classroom. The room with the fewest number of students gets the new student. No consideration is given to the special needs of the student or the current composition of the class. The research participants feel that some background information is needed regarding behavior, academic performance and personal needs. With this additional information, it may be possible to "match" the needs of the child with an existing classroom. Perhaps one classroom has a bi-lingual student already that could assist a new non-English speaking student rather than placing that student in a classroom that has no students familiar with a second language. Also, a classroom may already have identified behavior problems in which the teacher has developed a plan of action for improvement. To add another behavior problem to the classroom would upset the progress made thus far and require a new plan that includes yet another student that needs individual attention.

Each teacher is responsible for the instructional practices within their classroom. The Lake County School District provides a curriculum outline and pacing guide for each subject area but individual schools and individual teachers determine the instructional practices that best



suit the pursuit of those curricular goals. The challenge at Dean Elementary is complicated because some students enter directly from a foreign country, having little or no grasp of the English language. Communications with parents are difficult and building a sense of purpose and a common understanding of the rules and routines that govern activities of the school and classroom is left up to the teacher. Although a bilingual translator of the major second language is provided by the school district, this person provides for translation and interpretation of the teacher's communication only. Assistance with social support would be helpful in fostering a smooth transition of new families into the school setting.

Parents of transient students also must be understood as having a different mind-set than their more stable counterparts. Mobile students often come from economically disadvantaged homes where the parent's main concern is providing food and shelter on a limited and sometimes inconsistent income. These parents are usually unskilled laborers or temporary workers who are not capable of improving their opportunities for better employment with higher pay. Many of the transient families that enter Dean Elementary are drawn by the local poultry industry that offers jobs for the unskilled. This also has led to an influx of workers from outside the United States. These workers may or may not have a grasp of the English language. Green City has evolved into a city of diversity. The southern portion of the city has grown into a largely Hispanic area, with new shops and stores catering to that minority population that is ever growing. Signs and advertising appear in both languages and concerted efforts by the business community to communicate with these newcomers are made.

The sense of family for transient students may be different from our own view. Most Americans are keenly aware of their nuclear family (father, mother and children) while the

newer Americans are from extended families that include grandparents, uncles, cousins, etc. To these, the extended family provides comfort, stability, and security by combining incomes to provide the needs of all, housing, food, clothing, medical attention and other services. Some of the transient families have entered the country illegally yet the school system does not require proof of US citizenship and openly enrolls any student who is brought to the school, sometimes without accompanying birth records or verification of previous school experience.

## Recommendations

### District and School Recommendations

Within this study, major themes emerged as significant for teachers and schools to address. The issues of academics as well as personal and social needs were brought up by the research participants. Since many research studies document the alarming amount of movement in America today, schools can count on transient students entering and withdrawing from school throughout the academic term. Teachers are becoming frustrated with the lack of stability and are in need of an organized program or system to combat mobility at the district or school level. Support is needed to help teachers who are striving to create classroom stability in a highly mobile world.

Districts can develop new employees as transitional specialists to assist with high mobility issues. These specialists would help new transfer families complete registration paperwork upon the student's arrival at school. They could conduct a tour of the facilities to assist parents and the new students feel comfortable in their new environment. This will also give the parent a personal contact with the school. The specialist could also conduct parent workshops to inform them of school rules, routines, desired behaviors and provide the

opportunity to meet other newcomers, as well. This would help 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.

Given the findings in this study and drawing from similar research studies across the United States, several policy changes at the district, state, or national level are implied. These policy changes may reduce the level of mobility or help change the negative impact on students and schools.

Schools and districts often perpetuate student change by building new schools and redistricting students from one area to another. Attention should be given to limit policies of redistricting that contribute to unnecessary mobility. Adding classrooms or constructing new buildings and adding them to existing schools would limit the need for redistricting of students.

Local school districts could alter their attendance policies that would allow a child who moves within the district to stay in his or her original school for the remainder of the academic year. Research has shown that a move during the summer months, when school is not in session, is least invasive to student performance and progress (Stover, 2000).

Rather than stick with the existing curriculum, a closer look at Outcome-Based Education (OBE) strategies for schools in highly mobile areas might be an answer to low performing schools. Rather than set the standards around the curriculum, OBE proposes to turn the design of curriculum upside down, establish long-range outcomes first, then design the curriculum to meet the desired outcome. Outcome-based education is not a new concept to education. It has evolved over many years with the central premise that all children can learn and succeed, although not in the same way or on the same day. The idea that "success breeds success" allows

the school to determine the conditions of success at the level the student can be challenged yet still make successful progress.

Districts should continue efforts to improve the overall quality of the schools. This effort will result in greater satisfaction from the parents and reduce their desire to seek better schools for their children, thus eliminating school dissatisfaction as a cause for moving to another school.

School districts can also be flexible with school boundaries and provide transportation and other supports to help students in low-income situations from becoming transfer student statistics. A simple change in policy could allow transfer students to remain within their present school even if transportation is not provided by the district.

The multi-age grouping of classes for core subjects would be beneficial to students with limited English speaking abilities. Multi-age grouping is a deliberate grouping of children that includes more than one traditional grade level in a single classroom community. By providing instruction based on the ability to understand the language rather than providing instruction based on the age or grade level the student is placed in makes better educational sense and would lead to a more successful student. Learning is a continuous and dynamic process and children are encouraged to learn at different rates and levels. A more successful student is less likely to transfer to another school or district out of personal dissatisfaction.

Advancement in the use of technology in the classroom may prove to be a catalyst for success in mobile students. Technology in education is more than just computers. It includes calculators, video cameras, VCRs, as well as computers, printers and specialized software. Given the current and expanding access to technology both inside the classroom and at home, a student has expanded access to the curriculum as well as the expanded opportunity to communicate.

Since current data suggests that most mobile students come from poor, single parent families that move because of societal and economic pressures, student mobility and its impact on a child's ability to learn adds to the challenges these families face daily. The school district can help by providing initiatives that may help combat the adverse effects of mobility. Some of these initiatives include establishing mobility and attendance goals for schools to work toward. School systems can concentrate on educating families regarding the negative impact of student mobility. They can provide transportation to mobile students so they can continue to attend their same school within the district. School systems can increase the inter-school cooperation of those schools located within a cluster. Undertaking steps to make the transfer to a different school a smooth process would eliminate some of the anxiety. Maintaining expectations for high quality teachers and education in all schools should be a goal of every school. This study shows that the teacher is the key to successful students of all walks of life. And creating school environments that are places where students and parents want to be would increase the parent participation, making them feel a welcome part of the school.

The Chicago Public Schools created an initiative called "Staying Put" as a multi-level campaign to increase awareness about the effects of mobility on student achievement. This program was designed to decrease mobility and improve the student transfer process throughout the school system. Staying Put includes components for city officials, board of education members and administrators, local school councils, principals, teachers, counselors, parents and students. It is intended as an ongoing program with annual activities that continue until mobility rates decrease and no longer threaten student achievement. Among the plans materials are: *If You Move*, a brochure on student mobility; *Don't Leave School Without It*, a checklist for parents

who are transferring their children to a new school; *My Best Yet Folder*, a file kept by students and taken to the new school if they transfer; and *Staying Put*, lesson plans for teachers.

In addition, it is suggested that School Social Workers extend beyond the walls of the school to intervene in situations that may lead to mobility. By providing options and utilizing social agency contacts, the need to move may be avoided and mobility rates reduced.

A school system “welcome wagon” that reaches out to new parents would show a concerned and caring school system. If parents feel the school system cares for their child, they trust the academic decisions that are made on their child. Newcomer contacts would help familiarize new families with school protocols and assist in transitioning to school. If the need for an individualized learning plan is needed, this is the first step in collecting information necessary to that process.

Perhaps the most simple, yet critical, issue in mobility is the multiple practices of how to track mobility. The review of previous research studies show that there are a variety of methods used to report mobility. Local districts use the figures that best suit their needs, either when applying for additional grant funding or in explaining lack of achievement in student performance. Without consistent data, research continues to paint varied pictures that lead to inconsistent results. There needs to be a single, consistent method of measuring for mobility so that research data would be more useful and reliable.

#### Recommendations for Classroom Strategies

This research study shows that the teacher is the single most important element in the success of the transient student. Recognizing that mobility is a way of life for some students and planning to meet the special needs mobility requires falls almost entirely on the shoulders of the

classroom teacher. These suggestions are provided as opportunities for an individual teacher to improve the performance of the transient student.

All classroom teachers should be trained in the various modes of student learning. By recognizing that not all learners can learn in the same manner, it becomes critical that teachers know how to present instruction for the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learner and be comfortable in presenting classroom instruction utilizing all of these methods. It has been shown that the most successful strategy for instructing the limited English speaking student in American classrooms is to use the visual model. By showing pictures repetitively, and accompanying it with the English words to accompany it, a working knowledge of the English language is developed.

Teachers could form cooperative learning groups with other classroom teachers to assist with instruction. Children learn from their peers. By forming peer learning groups, the transient student will have a better opportunity to become an active part of the classroom and will not suffer the isolation of being a new student. One example of such a group would be a multi-age grouping for Reading, enabling each teacher to concentrate on a single reading level while asking the teacher to be responsible for only one reading level of instruction.

Peer-mediated instruction is a method that allows students to serve as instructional agents for other students. As Johnson and Johnson (1994) point out, students may interact in three ways during learning. They may compete to see who is the best. They may work alone, or they may have a stake in one another's success by working cooperatively. The teacher must still direct the actions of the group through careful structuring. Simply asking students to sit together and work in a group will not develop the mutual support needed for success.

Teachers have used learning centers for years with great success. Their appeal is that they are flexible enough to address variable learning needs. Especially successful in the lower elementary grades, a learning center is a classroom area that contains a collection of activities or materials designed to teach, reinforce, or expand a particular skill or concept. This allows the student to progress at his/her own pace and offers the opportunity to change the activity yet maintain the focus of the desired learning outcome. The center activities could begin with simple expectations then advance to more complex learning as the student begins to understand.

As teachers become familiar with the past learning experiences of the transient student, it would be wise to utilize constructivist learning techniques that more closely mirror experiences of learning from life. Mobile students have a wealth of practical experience from life's lessons yet are sometimes lacking in instructional knowledge. By transferring the knowledge they do know to situations where they can improve the classroom learning expectations, improvement in academic performance is possible. This is also known as "scaffolding" where learning is built from previous knowledge and life experiences.

It is important for classroom teachers to recognize the value of mobile students and quickly make them feel a part of their new class. This can be accomplished by modeling respect for the new student and eliminating ridicule that may come from classmates. From this research project, it was found that assigning a classroom "buddy" to the new student was the most often used practice to make the new student feel welcome. This practice provides a carefully selected student who guides the new student through the routines and explains the daily procedures in a relaxed manner. This also helps the teacher who does not have to spend time talking individually about expectations, homework procedures, classroom patterns, etc.



Teachers may also personalize lessons by integrating culturally relevant content. When a new student enters the classroom, knowing where they came from and understanding some of the personal experiences help make new lessons relevant to them. It also helps existing students with the understanding of the new student by giving them background knowledge. This helps enhance the self-concept of the transient student. This may not be as simple as it sounds. For example, a student may register as a “Hispanic”. But, there are various dialects within the Hispanic language. Teachers have to be careful of written interpretations, especially electronic or computerized translations, which may interpret words literally, causing confusion and embarrassment for the parents and the teacher.

Individualized instruction based on the specific need of the student could be successfully implemented. After school tutorials and advocate programs are beneficial in helping transient students improve their academic skills. If it is found the new student is lacking in a particular academic area, tutoring is one way to strengthen that area. By arranging after school help, the teacher is also showing the student they care enough to spend individual time helping them. It also shows the parent their child has been enrolled in a caring school that will help their child.

Looping is a practice where teachers move forward with the same group of students when promotions occur. If a teacher becomes familiar with a particular classroom of students and can move to the next grade level with them at the end of the academic year, that teacher loses no time in beginning instruction the next school term because he/she is already familiar with the students, their abilities, work habits, and special needs. While transient students may still move into the classroom, others who have had similar circumstances are there to assure the new students of their being accepted and helped along the way.

## Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of selected teachers toward transient (mobile) students in a chosen school. The results should determine if there are varying beliefs in what mobility is and project how these students are integrated into the classroom.

A qualitative case study approach using the symbolic interactionism method of data analysis was conducted for the purpose of exploring the attitudes and practices of selected classroom teachers in a highly mobile elementary school. This study was an exploratory effort in ethnographic inquiry. Interview sessions were conducted using a set of predetermined questions in a semi-structured format. By posing open-ended questions and encouraging open answers, taking field notes, and reviewing artifacts provided by the participants, data was analyzed and common themes identified. In addition, individual practices and attitudes were determined.

The data revealed that the mobile student is usually below expectations in academic performance. The mobile student comes from a family that is in the lower socio-economic status and is characterized by having attended several schools and is likely to move to other schools in the future. The parents move largely for economic or job related reasons yet want the best for their child. They do not realize that moving from school to school hurts their child's chances of academic performance and social acceptance. Parents are largely suspect of schools in general and of teacher's intentions toward their children. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers establish communications with parents and convince them that educational decisions that effect their child are made in the child's best interest.

This research project affirms that the classroom teacher is the main factor in the success or failure of transient students. Since new students are randomly placed in the classroom without

assessment or determination of individual needs, the teacher must be prepared for anything from limited proficiency in the English language, to poor work habits and social behavior. It is further noted that little help is given to the classroom teacher by the school administration or school system in preparing for these students. It is left to the creativity and organizational skills of the individual teacher to prepare for integrating new students into their classroom setting in the most effective manner. There is continued political movement for teachers to be held accountable for the success of all students, in all categories of gender, race, or specialized needs.

#### Future Research

Educating an increasingly diverse and mobile population presents a host of challenges to schools and particularly to classroom teachers. The necessity to develop a more effective way of tracking children as they move from school to school, of quickly and efficiently assessing new students thus guiding wise decisions about ways to meet their individual needs, is essential. There is also the need to establish communication with families regarding how they can support learning. Finally, how can the teachers be better prepared to deal with highly diverse and ever-changing groups of children in their classroom.

Future research should include a more reliable data collection system. At present, data collectors devise their own method of collecting facts and figures to suit their research endeavor. Inconsistent data provides inconsistent results. As previously stated, research studies have shown a confusing array of results from mobility having no influence on those who moved, some showing that mobility has a negative influence on performance and others concluding that mobility may result in higher performance. A benefit of a national standard would be the ability to compare across organizations rather than focusing on one individual organization, thus eliminating some of the confusing statistical data available.

As an example, there is not a single definition of a mobile student. Even within this research project, participants were in disagreement as to how many moves would constitute mobility. In some cases, the number of moves was irrelevant if multiple moves were the result of family obligations such as the military or job-related promotions.

Future research could examine the instructional practices of classroom teachers who teach highly mobile students within a diverse community. This research project touched briefly on this subject but further study would identify common practices that are best suited for teaching in a mobile setting. This could identify programs and practices in schools where mobile students are performing better than expected and make those programs accessible to others.

Participants in this research project did not consider students who transfer over the summer months as mobile students. However, reality is that these students are moving to a different school and will start over under a different set of rules and academic performance expectations. Perhaps future research could examine the relationship between mobile students who transfer over the summer months and their achievement in relationship to those who transfer during the school year and their achievement. Perhaps a study that focuses only on mid-year transfers would provide interesting data. Consistency in collecting hard data, such as standardized test scores, may prove difficult in Georgia due to the ever changing methods of assessing student performance.

Additional research topics may include specific racial, ethnic or socio-economic similarities and differences in the sampling, including specific causes for mobility and family leadership (single parent family vs. two-parent family) would provide comparative data. Even a

more concentrated look at the number of moves as well as the timing of those moves would be interesting.

Yet another area of interest would be to research society's attitudes such as the belief that success is the individual's responsibility and not solely the responsibility of the education system. As it is today, if a student fails to learn, it is solely the responsibility of the school and school system, thus the involvement of the court system in assigning blame in the form of litigation settlements.

A follow-up study similar to this one in which classroom teachers attitudes and specific activities of the classroom aimed at integrating and assisting mobile students is recommended. Similar finding should lead to changes in the way schools and school systems treat the mobile student populations and ultimately improve individual and collective performance.

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## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition of a transient (mobile) student?
2. How does student mobility affect your classroom?
3. What do you think is the most challenging aspect in dealing with transient students?
4. Does your school perform intake testing on new students who enroll?
5. What role do student records have in placement of transient (mobile) students?
6. How important is the parent's role in the success of mobile students?
7. How can teachers help minimize the negative impact of moving from one school to another?
8. Is there a difference in the effect of transiency on upper and lower elementary students? Which is more significant?
9. What advice can you give from your experiences with transient students?



APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT DATA FORM

Dear Colleague:

Thank you for participating in my doctoral research study. I reaffirm that your participation will be kept confidential. You will not be identified in any way nor is there any way others can trace participation back to you. Your complete honesty and openness is essential to the success of this research.

In order to provide a data comparison, I need some personal information regarding your professional training and experience. If you would provide answers to these questions, I can include this in my pre-research review.

Terry F. Dover

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Age: 21 - 30 \_\_\_\_\_ 30 - 40 \_\_\_\_\_ 40 - 50 \_\_\_\_\_ 50 - 60 \_\_\_\_\_

Race: White \_\_\_\_\_ Black \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_ Oriental \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Colleges Attended:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Major \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Major \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Major \_\_\_\_\_

**Georgia Teacher Certification (Current and Past)**

Level \_\_\_\_\_ Field \_\_\_\_\_ Current? \_\_\_\_\_  
Level \_\_\_\_\_ Field \_\_\_\_\_ Current? \_\_\_\_\_  
Level \_\_\_\_\_ Field \_\_\_\_\_ Current? \_\_\_\_\_

**Certification from Other States?** \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, Level \_\_\_\_\_ Field \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ Level \_\_\_\_\_ Field \_\_\_\_\_

**History of Teaching:**

Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years \_\_\_\_\_  
Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years \_\_\_\_\_  
Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years \_\_\_\_\_  
Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years \_\_\_\_\_

**Schools You have Taught In:**

School \_\_\_\_\_ Location \_\_\_\_\_  
School \_\_\_\_\_ Location \_\_\_\_\_  
School \_\_\_\_\_ Location \_\_\_\_\_  
School \_\_\_\_\_ Location \_\_\_\_\_