Educational issues for children of itinerant seasonal farm workers: A case study in an Australian context

Robyn Henderson

Queensland University of Technology

Although many Australian children change schools during the course of a school year, the children of itinerant seasonal farm workers can move residences as well as schools on a regular basis, often two or three times annually. Surprisingly, however, educational itinerancy has not been widely researched, particularly in Australian contexts. This paper uses a case study approach to discuss some of the issues that affect the literacy learning of the children from one family, who follow summer and winter harvesting seasons across state borders. Through this approach, the voices of the children and their families are heard alongside those of their teachers and other school personnel.

Introduction

Changing schools can be a difficult experience for any student, but, for the children of itinerant seasonal farm workers in Australia, it may involve moving from one state or territory to another and moving in and out of educational systems, which have different school entry ages, transition points, curriculum, and even handwriting styles (Curriculum Corporation 1998). Drawing on the experiences of the children from one

itinerant family, their parents and teachers in a rural community in North Queensland, Australia, this paper investigates some of the difficulties that may be experienced by itinerant families and by the teachers of itinerant children. Before presenting and discussing this single family case study, I investigate research into educational itinerancy and provide a brief comparison between the educational provisions for, and research about, itinerant workers' children in Australia and the US Migrant Education Program, which caters for the children of migratory or itinerant fishing and agricultural workers.

Research into educational itinerancy

Research into educational itinerancy – described by Danaher *et al*. (1998: 2) as 'the insights and challenges that derive from providing formal education for students who follow an itinerant lifestyle' – has been surprisingly limited, particularly in Australia. Of the research that is available, some has focused on mobile children in general, often attempting to identify the impact of itinerancy on children's learning (e.g. Duffy 1987, Fields 1997, Mills 1986, Welch 1987). Other research has investigated the effects of itinerancy on identifiable groups, including defence force (e.g. McCarthy 1991), show (e.g. Danaher 1995), circus (e.g. St Leon 2000) and gypsy (e.g. Smith 1997) children. Little has been said in Australia, however, about the children of seasonal farm workers. Although they usually rate a mention as another group whose parents are occupational travellers (e.g. see Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia 1998, Danaher 2000, Fields 1997, Welch 1987), they have not been the focus of specific educational considerations and little research has investigated whether there are specific educational issues surrounding their mobility (Henderson 2001).

The Migrant Education Program in the USA

The Australian situation contrasts dramatically with that of the USA, where educational provisions for the children of seasonal fishing and agricultural workers have become part of accepted educational practice. The Migrant Education Program was established in the 1960s, following a television screening of E.R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame*, a documentary that highlighted the poverty and hardships experienced by migrant (or migratory) and seasonal farm workers in the United States (National Association of State Directors of Migrant Education [NASDME] 2000). The program has current annual federal funding of over 395 million dollars and caters specifically for more than half a million children of migratory seasonal workers in fifty states, Puerto Rico and Washington D.C., having developed from its reasonably humble beginnings to a complex program that embraces electronic forms of communication:

> From an internal database begun in 1971 to nationwide distance learning programs in the early Nineties, the program now offers online courses, mobile computer labs, and satellite feeds. Some students are provided with laptop computers to stay in touch with their home schools as they move. (NASDME, 2000)

Although school districts are expected to identify and recruit migrant students, regional and state educational authorities co-ordinate services and programs across districts and states and in relation to a range of government legislations (Heartland Educational Consortium n.d., US Department of Education 2003). The Migrant

Education Program offers services for young children, funds for higher education institutions – to provide academic and support services to help students gain high school equivalency or college assistance (US Department of Education 2003) – and support for a bi-national program with Mexico (Flores 1996, Johnson & Hernández 2000). The latter was set up to help educators cater for students who move between the two countries and between different education systems, and to enhance information exchange about individual students (Davis 1997, Flores 1996).

Co-ordinated efforts, especially where states form consortia, are given additional funds that are meant to ensure both high standards and assistance for students to carry educational credit with them as they move from place to place (US Department of Education 2003, Wright 1995). The Portable Assisted and Study Sequence (PASS) and the Mini-PASS Programs, for example, provide self-contained units of study that parallel regular course offerings, to enable students to gain full or partial credit or to make up credit deficiencies that have resulted from their interrupted secondary schooling (Californian Department of Education 2000, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2001). In attempting to overcome 'the educational disruption and other problems that result from repeated moves' in an itinerant lifestyle (US Department of Education 2003), such compensatory measures suggest that much of the Migrant Education Program is founded on a distributive view of social justice (Gale 2000). This approach seeks equitable educational outcomes for migratory students, by providing alternative forms of access to human and material educational resources.

A large corpus of research is associated with the Migrant Education Program, and, probably because the program has existed for so long, most of this research appears to accept the premises that underpin the program. In particular, the program and the research are generally founded on beliefs that 'with the right supportive services, migrant children can achieve at the same level as their peers' (US Department of Education 2003) and that there is a need to 'overcome barriers arising from mobility and educational disruption' (NASDME 2000). The research falls generally into three broad categories: collections of demographic data or descriptions of migrant characteristics that are or are not being addressed by the operations of the program (e.g. Henderson 1998, Lawless 1986, Perry 1997, Texas Education Agency 1997); information about program design, strategies and schools' responses to migrant children's needs (e.g. Ascher 1991, Gonzales, Goldstein, Stief, Fiester, Weiner & Waiters 1998, Lawless 1986, Miller 1996, Montavon & Kinser 1996, Morse 1997), and program evaluation (e.g. Florida Department of Education 1998, Heiderson & Leon 1996). In other words, most of this research is focused on tracking patterns and trends in migrant education, providing opportunities to share resources, and evaluating programs that are in use.

An Australian context

Australian national educational policy argues for schooling to develop the capacities of all students and to be socially just (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA] 1999). Until recently, itinerancy or mobility had not been the focus of specific national research to identify its relationship to children's educational outcomes and social justice issues. However, a recent study for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training

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and Department of Defence (2002: 2) concluded that mobility has 'the potential to impact on learning outcomes', but that impact could be either positive or negative.

At the state level – in Queensland, for example, where the current research was undertaken – educational policy relating to itinerant or mobile students still seems formative. Whilst mobility is recognised as an issue – as evidenced by the discussion of mobility in a number of educational documents (e.g. Department of Education, Queensland 2001a, Department of Education, Queensland 2000) and the identification of itinerant students as a target group in some policies (e.g. Department of Education, Queensland 1998c) – there appears to have been little in the way of policy enactment. One notable exception has been the establishment of the mobile Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, consisting of two semi-trailer classrooms, two prime movers and mobile accommodation for teachers (Hughes 2002, 'Show time for Australia's first travelling school' 2002).

Whilst the 'show school' caters for a very specific and easily identifiable group, itinerant children tend generally to be 'less visible than more permanently located groups to the gaze of educational policy makers and researchers' (Danaher, Tahir, Danaher & Umar 1999: 1). Indeed, itinerant, seasonal farm workers are not readily identifiable as an occupational group. Even though data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) indicate that 318 600 people currently work in the agricultural industry, it has been pointed out that there are 'no official statistics directly relevant to seasonal employees' (National Harvest Trail Working Group 2000: 4). However, the clustering of groups of itinerant farm workers' children, in particular schools at particular times of the year, can make a significant, seasonal difference to school

enrolments. Although it might be speculated that school enrolment and departure records should offer data on the numbers of itinerant children in schools, this is not the case. Because education in Australia is the responsibility of state governments, each state or territory operates independently and tends to not track students across state borders. To exacerbate matters, schools do not always maintain records of parents' occupations and itinerant farm workers sometimes classify themselves as unemployed – as indeed they generally are when they first arrive in a town – thus making identification of itinerant farm workers' children quite difficult.

The study

In the absence of a 'big picture' about seasonal farm workers and their children in Australia, this article focuses on a coastal rural town in North Queensland and investigates the experiences of one family. Harbourton (a pseudonym) is the centre of a farming area that grows vegetable crops during the warm winter months. The town has a permanent population of approximately 8000, but, during the winter harvest, its population increases by approximately 30 per cent. Although Harbourton has seen little economic growth over the last ten years, the town receives an annual economic boost during the harvesting season. The arrival of the itinerant farm workers has major implications for some of Harbourton's businesses, especially real estate agents, accommodation houses and supermarkets, and for the town's educational institutions. Each year, during the harvesting season, approximately one hundred itinerant farm workers' children enrol at the town's three government schools.

This paper, however, reports only one case study – that of the 'Moala family', who identified themselves as Tongan. The children's parents were born in Tonga, worked

in New Zealand where their three children were born, and moved to Australia at the time their eldest child, 'Leilani', was beginning primary school. At the commencement of the study, Leilani was eleven years old and was enrolled in Year 6 of the Queensland school system, whilst her nine year old twin brothers, 'Sepi' and 'Sina', were in Year 4. The parents had been working as itinerant seasonal workers since their arrival in Australia and the family spent approximately seven months of each year in Harbourton and the remaining five months in a tomato growing area in the state of Victoria, over 2500 kilometres to the south. Because the children returned to Harbourton each year, they were well known to school personnel. During 2000 and 2001, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the parents, the children, the children's teachers and other school personnel, including the principal, the deputy principal and the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher.

Framing the investigation

In the current study, literacy is conceptualised as a social and cultural practice. Such a view challenges monolithic accounts of literacy as a set of neutral and transportable skills and, instead, understands literacy as 'an active, dynamic and interactive practice' that always occurs within social situations and cultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton 2000, Luke 1992, Teacher Education Working Party 2001: 4). Literacy teaching, then, is seen as a political, not neutral, activity and teachers play an instrumental role in the selection, construction and distribution of particular types of literacy, in socialising students into particular versions of the world, and in deciding what constitutes satisfactory literacy performance.

In investigating the literacy learning of the children of one particular family, this study explored teachers', parents' and children's talk about itinerancy and its perceived effects on literacy learning, thus looking beyond individuals towards social and cultural practices. These practices, then, were investigated within their social and cultural contexts, including the context of the social institution and the wider level of society as a whole. In this way, the data that were collected – interview texts and records of classroom observations – were examined to show how the context can enable or constrain the way people talk about itinerancy and literacy education for itinerant children (Fairclough 2001). In exploring the children's literacy learning and the effects of context, the data were considered in terms of the education system's policy of inclusion and commitment towards addressing barriers to access and participation, incorporating the perspectives of all cultural groups, and challenging injustice (Department of Education, Queensland 1998a, 1998b).

Investigating itinerancy

This investigation of the Moala family begins by examining the context of the school that the children attended in North Queensland, teachers' understandings about the children's progress in literacy learning, and the children's results. It then moves to the family context, offering insights from the parents and the children about their itinerant lifestyle and their perceptions of its impact on the children's education.

The school context

The arrival of the children of itinerant seasonal farm workers in Harbourton and their enrolment at the school resulted in an increase in the size of the school population, as well as an increase in the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school population.

Teachers were quick to point out that some institutional processes disadvantaged their school. In particular, they discussed the way that the annual increase in school enrolments was not recognised proactively by the education system, which conducted an enrolment census on the eighth day of the school year (in early February), when the itinerant children were still at their summer locations. As a result, the school's staffing numbers were allocated on what is usually the minimum annual enrolment and the arrival of itinerant children resulted in larger classes. The school's historical data showed that there was a definite seasonal enrolment trend, with the school population fluctuating in size from an average of 530 students, at the beginning of the school year, to an average of 575, at the peak of the harvesting season. Figure 1 shows the monthly student enrolments for the five years from 1997 to 2001. As is evident from this graph, enrolment numbers were at their lowest when the school year began in late January or early February; student numbers started to increase at the beginning of the harvesting season in April or May; and they reached a maximum at the peak of the harvesting season in August or September. This pattern was repeated on an annual basis.

Insert figure 1 about here

Although the education system responded to an increase in school enrolments once they exceeded a prescribed numerical standard, there was usually a time lag between the arrival of additional students and the provision of an extra teacher. At Harbourton, there were times when this reactionary approach to staffing provided an additional teacher just as some of the itinerant students were beginning to depart again. As the principal pointed out, the rearrangement of classes tended to be 'a

logistical nightmare,' because 'we get so many kids in that we have to rearrange classes to make more classes . . . when the numbers go down so do the class levels again and it all starts again. It's just one big cycle.'

Apart from the disruptions of rearranging classes, the teachers saw the increasing number of students as the cause of increased workloads and the need for school resources, both material and human, to stretch further. As the itinerant students arrived, the school was expected to use its resources to meet the needs of a larger, and high need, student population. Although these issues were generally kept in-house, there were times when teachers publicly aired their concerns about the difficulties experienced by schools whose enrolments fluctuate in line with harvesting seasons. Following a one-day strike of Queensland teachers in 2000, for example, one teacher wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, linking the local issue of fluctuating enrolments with the statewide push by teachers for smaller class sizes:

> Last Tuesday Queensland State School teachers voted for a work stoppage on Wednesday, June 14 . . . These claims are particularly relevant to Harbourton as an influx of seasonal workers in the middle of the year puts additional pressure on class sizes. (Clements 2000)

Although teachers discussed what they described as a lack of consistent systemic support for itinerancy, they acknowledged that the school did receive an additional staffing allocation for children with a language background other than English. Approximately 85 per cent of the itinerant children were from Turkish, Tongan, Samoan, Maori or Vietnamese backgrounds and, along with other children from non-

English speaking backgrounds, formed a sizable group within the school. However, specialist personnel were not readily available in the area and the time allocation for an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher varied from year to year. In 2000, when data collection for this study commenced, the ESL teacher was employed one day per fortnight to work across the three Harbourton schools. Probably not surprisingly, the 'regular' classroom teacher who filled the position said that she felt 'inefficient,' that she experienced difficulties working within the inadequate time allocation, and that she would have liked some training in ELS teaching. Although the time allocation was increased to two and a half days per week in 2001, the time still seemed inadequate to meet the needs of the three schools.

Many of the teachers indicated that they felt constrained by the context within which they worked. A shortage of resources and inadequate staffing were issues that they believed were beyond their control, but they regarded these issues as ones that impacted on their everyday teaching and their ability to work effectively in their classrooms. Many also argued that the pressure of increased workloads and limited resources had a negative effect on the whole school population. As the principal pointed out, the resource situation created tensions within the school. He identified the tendency for school personnel to think about the itinerant students as different and separate from the students who attended the school all year round:

> There's always the thought of are they dragging money away from our twelve monthers, you know, like our kids that stay here all the time. There's always that thought, even though we don't, we always say no, they're kids at our school too.

Such comments suggested that, within the context of the school, the children of itinerant farm workers' children were often positioned as 'problems' who impacted not only on the everyday lives of teachers but also on the 'twelve monthers', the non-itinerant children who attended the school. Despite efforts by some school personnel to regard the itinerant children as 'kids at our school too', it seemed that, as a group, they were often seen in binary opposition to residentially-stable children.

Teachers' understandings

Even though the teachers generally identified the arrival and enrolment of itinerant farm workers' children as a problem for the school, especially in relation to increasing class sizes and perceived increased workloads, they seemed to have a positive regard for the Moala family. I regularly heard comments that praised the Moala children as being 'lovely', well-behaved and model students. The principal told me that 'They've been absolutely wonderful. Everyone loves them,' and the twins . . . they're the loveliest kids out.' Leilani was also described positively, with one teacher saying that she was 'very keen, she's excellent in the classroom, and she works diligently. I mean, she is the essence of a model student.' Whilst these comments located positive traits, such as work ethic, in the children, other comments from teachers linked the children's 'good' behaviours to 'good' parenting and a supportive home environment. Sepi and Sina's Year 4 teacher, for example, explained that 'the parents must be keen for them to do well at school, because they're always well-behaved and . . . they've always got their homework done.'

The Moala family was one of the families that teachers described as 'regulars' – families who returned to Harbourton every year for the duration of the harvesting season. Teachers reported that Leilani, Sepi and Sina always seemed pleased to be back in Harbourton and that the other children were excited by their return. Sepi's Year 5 teacher, for example, had not worked at the school for long and was surprised by the enthusiastic reaction of her class to his arrival: 'They were excited. Everyone wanted his desk beside them. They were saying, is it Sina or Sepi? Sina or Sepi? . . . They were buzzing . . . he was a celebrity.' Indeed, I heard many comments from teachers about the ease with which the 'regulars' fitted into the school and how children like the Moala children were able to cope emotionally and socially with their biannual transitions between schools. As Sina's Year 5 teacher explained, 'They're happy to be back. The kids are happy to receive them and they just settle back to a desk and continue.'

My observations in Sina and Sepi's classrooms suggested that the twins did have effective strategies for coping with their placement in 'new' classes. Both were skilled at checking with students sitting nearby to make sure that they had taken out the correct notebook or were doing the correct activity. If they had problems with a task, they asked their teachers for help. Neither of them seemed to have any difficulties interacting socially in the classroom and they always seemed to be actively engaged in classroom learning tasks. According to some of the teachers, the difficulties of moving between schools were minimised by moving between the same two schools every year. In the words of one teacher,

They're only going to two schools a year and they're going to the same two

schools every year, so they're familiar with the schools and they go back with

the same kids they were with the year before. So they're not struggling

making friends or feeling threatened or anything. So they come pretty much

straight back into learning straight away and don't have to spend a couple of

weeks getting used to the school.

This view appeared to be based on the understanding that moving between 'known'

school environments was easier than moving between 'unknown' environments. This

may very well have been the case, as the children returned each year to the same

school, with students they knew, teachers they knew, routines that they had

experienced in other years, and so on. However, as will be shown, the children's

academic results and the children's and parents' talk about being itinerant suggested

that the transitions between schools were more problematical than the teachers

thought.

The children's academic achievement

In terms of academic achievement in literacy learning, the children's school report

cards indicated that they were 'developing satisfactorily' or 'gaining a sound

achievement' in most areas of literacy, but, in few areas, they were 'emerging' or had

'limited or very limited achievement' ratings. Whilst the report cards suggested that

their overall progress was satisfactory, Sepi and Sina's scores on tests set and marked

externally to the school told a different story. In Year 4, Sepi and Sina sat for the

Australian Schools English Competition, which is organised by the University of New

South Wales, and gained low scores – 9 and 16 out of 50 respectively. In the

following year, their results on the Year 5 Aspects of Literacy Tests (reading and viewing, writing and spelling), which are used in Queensland to meet Australian benchmarking requirements, located them in the lower 25% of students in the state. All of the external tests indicated that Sepi and Sina were not doing well in comparison to their peers. Leilani, however, scored in the higher 25% range of students for the writing component of the Year 7 Aspects of Literacy Tests and in the middle 50% for spelling and for reading and viewing. Whilst test scores like these have been critiqued for being 'snapshots' of performance, rather than providing 'any long-term assessment of students' developing capacities in literacy events' (Queensland Department of Education 2000), such scores should contribute to the overall picture of students' performances and be considered along with other assessment data that teachers have collected. What seemed to happen in the case of the Moala children, however, was that none of the teachers commented on or mentioned the children's results on external tests.

When asked to comment on the children's progress in literacy learning, teachers acknowledged that they were experiencing difficulties, but were achieving as well as could be expected 'under the circumstances'. Whilst some teachers assumed that the children's backgrounds limited their chances of success, others believed that the children's hard work and effort would eventually lead to success. Leilani was seen as having 'the drive to do well' and the twins were described as having 'all the attributes that someone sort of needs to learn: they listen; they try hard; they want to learn' and they were 'not so low that they need specialist attention'. It appeared, therefore, that the children's behavioural attributes – 'good' classroom behaviours, 'good' attitudes to schooling and successful coping strategies – masked the specific difficulties that

they were experiencing in literacy learning. Their low achievement levels were not only seen as predictable, but were accepted as taken-for-granted outcomes of their circumstances.

On a number of occasions, teachers made comparisons between the achievement levels of itinerant children and the rest of the school's population. One of Sepi and Sina's teachers explained that 'There's not a huge difference between them [Sepi and Sina] and many other students in the class'. It seemed, then, that in classroom contexts where achievement levels were generally low, that Sepi and Sina were noticed for their 'good' behaviours rather than their low achievement levels.

In reading the interview transcripts where teachers talked about the children's literacy difficulties, I became aware that many of their comments matched the features that Gibbons (1991: 4) described as 'some general characteristics associated with the English of some bilingual children'. For example, the children were identified as being hesitant readers, having poor comprehension, confusing words, having difficulty with grammar, being poor at spelling and so on. It appeared, however, that the teachers had not linked these features to the children's linguistic backgrounds and the possibility that their ESL status may have had implications for their performances and successes or failures in school literacy tasks. This seems to reflect the findings of other Queensland research, that has suggested that the recognition of student diversity is generally not a strength of teachers, even though they may excel at providing supportive learning environments for students (Department of Education, Queensland 2001b, Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn 1995).

In making sense of what was happening, however, it is probably important to remember the nature of the school context within which the teachers were working and the pressures that they were under. Teachers were trying to cope with seasonal enrolments and departures, oversized classes, sometimes a 'new' class because of the reconfiguration of classes that resulted from an additional teacher being employed, limited resources and resultant increased workloads. The 'specialist' ESL teachers, who should have been able to assist them, had no previous formal training in ESL teaching and had limited access to professional development.

The family context

The interviews I conducted with Mr and Mrs Moala helped to provide details of the context within which the family lived, worked and travelled. Their interviews indicated that family decisions about whether to continue living an itinerant lifestyle were made within a context framed by financial pressures, educational concerns and health considerations. Mr and Mrs Moala were adamant that being itinerant was not their preferred lifestyle, but that their financial commitments and the lack of ongoing work in Harbourton prevented them from staying permanently. They jointly constructed an explanation of their financial situation:

Mr Moala: We need some money, because something like financing all these things. At the moment we can't, we can't stay in here.

Mrs Moala: Can't afford to stay here.

Mr Moala: Can't afford to stay here because we have to pay

Mrs Moala: Debts and

Mr Moala: Money, finance all these things. If we're going to be

Mrs Moala: If we've got nothing to pay, that's all right.

Mr Moala: Then we stay here.

One of the options that they had considered was to divide the family for the summer harvesting season, with Mrs Moala and the children remaining in Harbourton while Mr Moala worked in Victoria. This option, however, raised a new set of concerns, relating to health, safety issues, including cyclones, and how each would cope with such issues in the absence of the other parent.

Mrs Moala: I haven't stay with the kids myself, you know, before . . . It's alright, but me, I'm not very healthy, because I, sometimes that's what I was saying to him, what about if I get sick . . . There need to be someone to be with us, and that's why we still not really sure what will happen December . . .

Mr Moala: I tell her it's better for her to stay with the kids. I can go by myself. But she can't. But not only that. It's what I think, it's very hard for me myself to go. You know what I mean, the wind you get here, in Queensland, like cyclone and all those things like that coming up, in the time that I was in Victoria, I don't know.

The family's educational concerns

Whilst teachers thought that Sepi and Sina were able to cope reasonably well in the classroom, the twins and their parents thought otherwise. Mr and Mrs Moala recognised that Sepi and Sina were experiencing difficulties at school and that it was

'very hard when they do the English . . . that's their second language.' During my visits to the family, it became evident that homework was a daily, family affair, with the children and parents sitting around the kitchen table in the late afternoon. Mr and Mrs Moala, however, expressed concern that they were finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the schoolwork that their children were doing and that they were sometimes unable to help them when difficulties arose.

It appeared, however, that Mr and Mrs Moala were doing their best to meet school requirements and this included matching their travelling with the ends and beginnings of school terms. For example, they explained:

Mr Moala: That's why we try to get into the

Mrs Moala: Victoria.

Mr Moala: Stay while, I mean, before they start school and all this thing, then get back here before the next semester starts.

Mrs Moala: Not to stay long out from school. Always make plans that we, plans that we get here on time and get off on time before school starts. You know it's very hard.

Mr and Mrs Moala were adamant that they wanted their children to do well at school and that they did not want them following their parents into farm labouring as an occupation.

The children, however, were more concerned about the daily difficulties that they experienced as part of changing schools, education systems and year levels. In the following interview transcript, they talked about some of their concerns.

RH: How do you go at school Leilani?

Leilani: At this one?

RH: Mmm.

Leilani: Really good. My education is really high, but when I go down to Victoria my education is high but their work isn't as high as Queensland work.

Sepi: But when you go back to Victoria you do easy work and when you go up to Queensland it's really hard and you don't understand.

Sina: In Harbourton we do work and when we go down there in Victoria we do the same one.

Leilani: Yeah. We do the subjects here and like they just started on it. It's really hard for our education.

Although the children spoke generally and did not give specific examples to support their comments, their perceptions identified the effects of year-level variations, different starting ages, and different curricular, differences that currently exist amongst the educational systems of the Australian states (see Commonwealth Department of Education Science & Training & Department of Defence 2002, Curriculum Corporation 1998). Whilst the children seemed unaware of the corollary to their complaint, it is probably fair to assume that they also missed out on sections

of the established curriculum at both sites. Their parents were also concerned about the implications of such differences:

Mr Moala: I think they're going to miss some of their friends and not only that, I don't know about their subjects.

Mrs Moala: Education.

Mr Moala: I mean, the syllabus of Victoria and Queensland, is it the same or different? I don't know. They're just the sorts of things that I was thinking about because I'm not sure whether Victoria is lower in the syllabus or if Queensland is higher or something like that. And I'm not sure that they going come in starting where they finished from Victoria, whether they start on the same thing here or they miss out some of, you know what I mean?

Although my observations of the Moala children suggested that they had successful strategies for coping with 'new' classrooms, discussions with the children indicated that they often found schoolwork quite difficult. In one interview, for example, Sina talked about a work sheet that was pasted into one of his Year 5 exercise books:

Sina: This one, it's hard, because I don't know how to do it. See, *(reading)* List the . . . I can't read that answer.

RH: Oh, you can't read the question.

Sina: The big words.

RH: *(Reading)* List the features . . .

Sina: *(Continuing to read)* on the TV. Undue . . .

RH: *(Reading)* Underline.

Sina: *(Reading)* Underline the

RH: *(Reading)* attributes. That is a hard word, isn't it? So how did you get these answers?

Sina: My friend help me.

Although Sina had had difficulty reading the instructions, he had been able to complete the questions with the help of a friend, or as it appeared later in the interview, with the help of several friends. It seemed that he had worked out that sitting close to friends who could help him was an effective strategy to use in the classroom. He also had a definite idea of which friends would be able to help him and which ones would not:

RH: And who's your friend [who helps you]?

Sina: Oh, Jedd, Rick, Tony. Jack's not any good. He is a little bit, when he does these. And that's all.

Although such strategies enabled Sina to look as though he had completed the work set by the teacher, he may have unintentionally misled his teacher into thinking that he was coping quite well.

Emerging issues and implications

This paper set out to provide insights into some of the educational issues affecting one family of itinerant seasonal farm workers in an Australian context. Whilst it is

recognised that generalisations cannot be drawn from a single case study, this approach provided an opportunity for a detailed exploration of the experiences and views of the parents and children from one family, the Moalas, alongside the voices of teachers within the school context. In comparison to the United States, where the children of itinerant fishing and agricultural workers are able to access the Migrant Education Program – and 'recruiters' work to find and encourage children to join the program – itinerant children in Australia seem to move almost invisibly within and between state educational systems. This is not the case, however, at local sites, like the school in Harbourton, where considerable numbers of itinerant farm workers' children enrol during the annual harvesting season.

In accessing the perspectives of teachers, parents and children, this study demonstrated the significance of a view of educational itinerancy and literacy learning that incorporates social and cultural factors beyond the context of the school. A broader focus not only helped to open up some of the links between cultural practices of families and schools and wider social factors, but could assist teachers in reflecting on their own practices in relation to equity issues. In the Harbourton school context, teachers focused only on school and institutional practices, measuring the Moala children in terms of their 'fit' with what they saw as the 'normal', residentially-stable student population. Similarly, they measured the school's ability to cater for itinerant children in terms of its 'fit' with other schools, thus arguing for a social justice that compensated disadvantage by ensuring access to educational resources. In particular, they wanted additional staff and funding, in advance of the annual arrival of itinerant farm workers' children, to maintain a level playing field with other schools. Such a

view, however, helped to maintain their constructions of itinerant farm workers' children as 'problems' for the school.

Although discussions about the arrival of itinerant farm workers' children were often framed in negative terms, teachers always spoke positively about the Moala children and were pleased with the way that they 'fitted in' to school processes. In terms of literacy learning, however, these normative views were accompanied by low expectations of academic success, and the children's difficulties with literacy learning were seen as predictable and taken-for-granted outcomes of an itinerant lifestyle and non-English speaking background. Of concern is the way that such assumptions seemed to constrain the pedagogical decisions that teachers made. They did not appear to be worried about the Moala children's poor results on standardised testing measures, but, instead, rated the children's competent classroom displays of enthusiasm for learning and effective coping strategies as evidence that they were working at acceptable levels. Such responses, however, do not augur well for the children's futures, especially in the light of research findings (e.g. Lamb, 1997) that school achievement in literacy and numeracy is generally predictive of later success in life. Whilst literacy success does not guarantee children's futures, Lamb (1997: 38) argued that it 'will help improve their chances of completing school and accessing a wider range of post-compulsory pathways'.

The interviews with the children and their parents highlighted the way that barriers to the children's literacy learning, including the curriculum discontinuity that the children reported, seemed to be invisible to teachers. It appeared that the children's 'good' attitudes and behaviours, in the school context, masked the problems that they

were experiencing and led teachers into believing that not only were they coping quite well, but that their regular movement between 'known' schools alleviated some of the perceived difficulties or disadvantages of changing schools. Within the context of the school, it appeared to be quite difficult for teachers to 'see' other factors that were impacting on the Moala family. As the case study demonstrated, interviews with the parents and children highlighted a range of difficulties and drew attention to a number of family social practices, none of which had come to the attention of teachers. Teachers were unaware, for example, of Mr and Mrs Moala's efforts to support their children's education within a complex web of family considerations, including those that related to finances, health and safety. In not knowing about these complexities, it was easy for teachers to adopt a 'permanent resident'/'itinerant' binary, that identified the itinerant children as additional to, and separate from, the 'normal', non-itinerant school population.

If school personnel are serious about working towards equitable literacy outcomes for itinerant children, then the case study of the Moala family suggests that they will need to go beyond expectations that outside support, such as the proactive provision of additional teachers by the education system, will 'fix' the problems supposedly caused by itinerant children. Although such support might ease some of the difficulties caused by larger classes and the resultant increased workloads, it does not address issues of academic underachievement or what Education Queensland's (2000: 31) *Literate Futures* document referred to as 'the systematic under-provision of literacy education to certain categories of students and community'. In assessing whether groups are at risk of underachieving and whether institutional practices are implicated, teachers and schools take responsibility for ensuring equitable outcomes.

Whilst the single case study offers opportunities for teachers to consider the complex interplay of assumptions about itinerant children, literacy learning and ESL learning in relation to one family, it would seem important to learn more about the farm workers' families who join the school community on an annual basis. Whilst school personnel in Harbourton are already aware of the diversity that exists amongst itinerant farm workers' families, particularly in relation to ethnicity, it would probably be helpful to consider both visible and invisible aspects of culture. To take a wider contextual view, to look beyond the school context, and to tease out the diversity of children's experiences and literacy practices would be one way of beginning to consider how the school can ensure equitable access, participation and academic outcomes. Similarly, a broader view of social justice, which goes beyond compensatory approaches that are often underpinned by deficit accounts of students and families who do not meet accepted 'normal' practices, would help to highlight and promote recognition of difference and begin the challenging task of investigating taken-for-granted assumptions (Gale 2000).

By accepting and valuing an itinerant lifestyle, teachers can begin to re-think literacy education within the school context. Such an approach would move away from an understanding of itinerancy as 'an unfortunate "problem" that must be "solved" or "escaped"' (Danaher & Danaher 2000: 28), toward discussions about access, participation and socially-just literacy curriculum in relation to itinerant children. Whilst aspects of the US Migrant Education Program offer possible models for action, the lack of established processes or programs in Australia may very well be an advantage, as school personnel have opportunities to consider, without

preconceptions, itinerancy and how it relates to a range of educational issues in particular contexts. With the recent announcement that 'nationally consistent curriculum outcomes' will be developed in several core areas of schooling and that school starting ages across Australia will be converged (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2003, Queensland Government 2003), such considerations can occur in conjunction with systemic change to assist mobile and itinerant students.

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