

Do Absence and Mobility (Transience) Affect Reading Literacy Achievement?

Ratna Rintaningrum

Abstract

Reading literacy has been regarded as an important subject taught at the primary school level as it is the foundation for learning across all subject. Australia, as a developed country, has placed great emphasis on the importance of reading literacy in primary schools by establishing various educational policies and undertaking various programs, both for teachers and students, to improve the teaching of reading literacy in school. However, different students have different levels of skill in acquiring reading comprehension. The findings of some studies suggest that there are a number of reasons why some children perform better in reading literacy than others do. Absence and mobility are two factors that are considered to have effect on reading achievement. Both Australia, America and International studies have shown that there is negative relationship between absence, mobility and school achievement.

Keywords : *Absence, Mobility, Reading, Achivement*

It is widely acknowledged the importance of reading literacy in the context of personal development, of schooling, and of national development. Reading literacy plays important role in the human life as people who are literate are more likely to have chance to fully participate in the society than people who are illiterate. Moreover, they have more opportunities to take a part in international activities, such as International conference, research exchange, International projects, business and commerce. Therefore, fostering early literacy is important for child development as it is able to increase their command of language and their understanding of how language works.

Some research workers in the area of Reading Comprehension and Reading Literacy have identified some factors appear to operate to influence reading literacy achievement. Absence and mobility are factors identified to have effect on reading performance. This paper explores the impact of absence and mobility on reading literacy achievement, reasons why students are missing school and how assistance can be provided for students, in particular, students who have problem with absence. Moreover, this paper discusses other impacts of mobility on child development.

Absence

Recently, missing school or truancy had become of interest in public discussion as well as in educational research, as it was associated with school

achievement. Absenteeism has been intensely studied in the United States and Great Britain (Wilmers & Greve, 2002, cited in Wagner, Dunkake & Weiss, 2004) and an International study such as TIMSS (1994/1995) have also reported on the results of school absenteeism. The results of prior studies have also shown that the level of unexplained absence or of truancy was associated with poor educational performance among students.

In Australia, indigenous students, on the whole, had higher absence rates than non-indigenous students (Rothman, 1999a). But not all indigenous students were poor attendees. It was recorded that approximately one in six indigenous students in South Australia had perfect attendance during one term of schooling (Rothman, 1999b).

Regardless of the number of indigenous students in the school population, children from disadvantaged family backgrounds were also likely to exhibit higher levels of problematic school behaviour (for instance truancy) (Rothman, 1999a; Considine & Zappala, 2002). Data from the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) in 1997 (Rothman, 1999a) noted that indigenous students had higher absence rates as well as students from low SES background.

Truancy (absence) has also been identified as the most powerful predictor of delinquency by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (DeKalb, 1999). It was also reported that students who were not at school during school hours were committing crimes, including shoplifting, vandalism and writing graffiti. However, shoplifting arrests dropped by 60 per cent when the Education Office conducted a three-week sweep for truants on the streets (Garry, 1996). Truancy tended to be higher among students from low SES backgrounds and this might also contribute to their poorer academic performance at school (Sparkes, 1999), graduation, promotion, self-esteem and employment potential (DeKalb, 1999; Considine & Zappala, 2002). Therefore, students who were frequently truants were socially and economically disadvantaged for life (Hibbett et al., 1990; Fergusson et al., 1995).

A longitudinal study of African American Males conducted by Robins and Ratcliff (1978) indicated that of students who were frequently truant in elementary

school and truant in high school, 75 per cent failed to graduate, that, in turn, was associated with diminished earning potential in adulthood and other poverty-related outcomes. Truancy might lead to a deterioration of classroom atmosphere as well as school atmosphere (Baumert, et al., 2002, cited in Wagner, Dunkake & Weiss, 2004) because dealing with truant students took a lot of time and energy for teachers. As truancy negatively affected the future of the youth, it was therefore important to understand the causes of truant behaviour for students. Different individuals, however, had different reasons why truancy happened for them. Teachers actually wanted to help students but differences in opinions created barriers to understanding between teachers and students. In a survey students cited that boredom and loss of interest in school, irrelevant courses, suspension and bad relationship with teachers were among the reasons why students skipped school (DeKalb, 1999). However, teachers believed that truancy was mainly related to the students' problems with family and peers (ERIC/CEM and Linn-Benton Education Service District, 1992). Therefore, it was necessary to develop school policies about attendance in order to reduce truancy (DeKalb, 1999). The policies should be strong and of consequence at every level – teacher, student, counsellor and principal. Policies should be well publicized, including the consequences of good and poor attendance specified in writing (DeKalb, 1999). Additionally, it would be better if unexcused absence was followed up by a letter or a telephone call to the parents of truants or absentees (Bartlett, Larry et al., 1978, cited in De Kalb, 1999).

The problem of school attendance would not disappear directly. Some students were willingly attending school but others were not, primarily because they had problems that negatively affected their willingness to attend school. Therefore, this kind of student needed attention and intervention from people in and out of the school in order to help them solve their problems. Some schools applied approaches to make students come to school regularly, such as providing a supervising worker to verify the students' school attendance and to meet them several times a week and to provide therapy services that helped them build their self-esteem and their self-confidence skills in order to be successful students (Garry, 1996). Moreover, as a part each school's and each school system's stakeholders, parents' intervention in

reducing absenteeism was required as research showed that parental involvement in their children's learning led to better school attendance and fewer behavioural problems at school (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001).

Mobility, Transience

The resident population of Australia is currently approximately 20 million people. Surveys published by the Australian Bureau Statistics (ABS) during 1999 and 2000 estimated that in Australia 34 per cent of the resident population moved their place of residence at least once during a three year period. The percentage of residents from households without children who moved at least once over three years was larger than from households with children (38 and 30 per cent, respectively), and it was argued that households with children were less likely to move than households without children.

Intrastate mobility (moving between suburbs within a city) was common among the majority of household movements and it has continued to increase. Although intrastate mobility was common, it was less likely to result in children changing schools when compared to interstate migration, when students automatically changed schools.

According to the ABS, during the year ending June 2001 an estimated two per cent of the resident population moved interstate. It was reported that 20 per cent of younger children (0-14 years old) were more likely to be involved in interstate migration than older children. Since children usually moved because their parents moved, it was reasonable to assume that families with younger children were more likely to move than those with older children.

Mobility had the potential to impact either positively or negatively on student learning outcomes where "a student has more than two moves in three years; or patterns of family movement involve students in relocating school or periods of time when they do not attend school" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). Unfortunately, research on the impact of mobility on students' school achievement was very limited in both Australia and the United States (Henderson, 2002; Hungi, 2003).

From consultations with stakeholders across Australia, it was apparent that frequent relocation had the potential to compound the effects of other problems that impacted on learning outcomes and that, where high levels of mobility were apparent, the mobility itself had a negative impact on student learning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). The results of previous studies have found a negative association between high mobility and student learning (Fields, 1997; Henderson, 2002) because those students who moved schools on many occasions were more likely to experience greater difficulties in learning than students who had moved schools on fewer occasions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).

The negative effects that arose from students' mobility in Australia included disrupted social and academic development (Birch & Lally, 1994; Fields, 1995), lower achievement levels (Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1988), delayed progression from one year level to the next (Rahmani, 1985), and greater high school drop-out (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). In contrast, other researchers suggested that the effects of mobility on school achievement were either minimal (Evans, 1996) or could not be distinguished from the effects of other factors, such as poverty, unemployment, ethnicity (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Wright, 1999), increased isolation or loss of social support (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Braithwaite, 1995).

Several studies on the relationship between mobility and school achievement had presented contradictory findings, however, attempting to identify and understand some of the complexities of the mobility-school relationship, interest in the issue was growing in the body of Australian research (Henderson, 2002). Research on schooling issues relevant to the children of itinerant farm workers (Henderson, 2002) and issues relating to show and circus children (Wyer, Danaher, Kindt & Moriarty, 1997) were investigated by a group of researchers at the Central Queensland University, who repeated the findings of some available studies that had shown negative relationships (Moriarty & Danaher, 1998; Settles, 1993).

There certainly seemed to be widespread belief among teachers and parents that mobility had an adverse impact on children's educational achievement (McCarthy, 1991; Queensland Department of Education, 2000; Commonwealth of

Australia, 2002, cited in Henderson, 2002) therefore “to help children manage, learn from and build on change is one of the most important gifts that parents can give their child” (Linke, 2000). However, the strategies that were often suggested for avoiding or overcoming the effects of mobility were usually aimed “at changing family practices and moving families closer to normative behaviour” (Henderson, 2002).

Mobility has been identified as a consideration in literacy learning in the Queensland Literate Futures document (Queensland Department of Education, 2000), with explicit reference to the link between effective literacy instruction and an understanding of students’ life experiences, including mobility:

Effective literacy instruction is connected to the world. It is about students from diverse backgrounds using these tools to envision, plan and sustain life pathways in the face of uncertain economic conditions, mobile families and dynamic community cultures ... Many Queenslanders are having to use language and literacy to communicate inter-culturally: working across cultures and across languages, across communities and across borders. (Queensland Department of Education, 2000, cited in Henderson, 2002, p.6)

Although mobility has been recognized as a factor that influenced students’ successes in literacy learning, information about the interaction between mobility and other factors, such as poverty and Indigeneity, was scarce (Henderson, 2002). However, it would seem to be widely recognized that mobility related to, for instance, the availability of job and housing, the non-availability of appropriate schooling in small communities, family commitments and responsibilities, that was part of the lives of many Indigenous families (Henderson, 2002).

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