Managing Pupil Mobility

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study into the effects of pupil mobility and what schools do to mitigate those effects. Pupil mobility is defined as the total movement in and out of schools by pupils other than at the usual times of joining and leaving.

The report draws on an analysis of the relationship between mobility and attainment in over 3,300 primary schools and nearly 1,000 secondary schools that OFSTED inspected between January 2000 and July 2001. It also uses detailed evidence from visits to a small number of schools with high mobility levels, but varying demographic composition, in five local education authorities (LEAs).

Since January 2000, schools undergoing inspection have been asked to provide data on pupil mobility. Inspectors and schools can now access national data in order to make comparisons. Inspectors are encouraged to be alert to the effects of mobility on the school. The general approach set out in *Evaluating educational inclusion: guidance for inspectors and schools* (OFSTED, 2000) provides a backdrop.

Visits to schools in the survey were less concerned with large-scale planned movement ('turbulence'), such as movement following military postings or a school closure, than with the comings and goings of pupils throughout the school year ('transience' or 'the trickle factor'). High turnover of the latter kind may have a number of causes, including housing relocation, family break-up, seasonal labour, the movement of Traveller families or the settlement of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Main findings

❑   The data from the inspected schools indicate very wide differences between schools in the extent of pupil mobility. Mobility features more generally in primary schools than in secondary schools, while there is more variation in the secondary phase in the extent of mobility across different LEA areas. Secondary schools in Inner London have double the level of mobility of secondary schools elsewhere.

❑   The relationship between pupil mobility and attainment is complex. It is difficult to isolate the effect of pupil mobility on attainment because it often occurs alongside other factors, such as disrupted family life. Differences in the relationship between mobility and attainment also reflect differences between schools in their ability to manage mobility effectively.

❑   Schools with high mobility levels face considerable challenges. Some cope very well, often with the help of additional resources, and show high levels of awareness of pupils' needs and a strong commitment to meeting them. Most

schools offer pupils good personal support, but find induction, assessment and appropriate classroom provision more difficult to organise.

❑ Steps taken by the schools visited to manage high mobility levels included:

- relationships with parents and carers were forged quickly and issues of immediate concern were dealt with efficiently;

- pupils received information packs and prompt induction to school routines, as well as personal support in coming to terms with them;

- information on attainment was obtained as quickly as possible from pupils' previous schools and this, together with the outcome of assessments of new pupils on arrival, was disseminated promptly;

- new pupils were placed in appropriate teaching groups. At secondary schools, this took account of the options pupils had taken at their previous schools. Existing pupils were prepared for the new arrivals;

❑ staff discussed schemes of work with new pupils to establish their familiarity with the work and what needed to be done to fill any gaps in knowledge.

❑ Some LEAs have effective strategies for identifying and supporting schools with high pupil mobility levels. These are reflected in their budget schemes and links with other agencies. Other LEAs appear to do little to help schools handle the effects of high mobility.

Data on mobility and achievement

Inspection data

Among the **primary schools** inspected, pupil turnover ranged from zero to over 80%. The median was 11.1%. The extent of turnover across the different types of LEA varied, and was higher in inner and outer London LEAs than elsewhere. The data showed a relationship between mobility and known eligibility for free school meals, but the relationship was less marked than that found in secondary schools.

The relationship between mobility and Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test results was weak.

Among the **secondary schools** inspected, pupil turnover ranged from zero to 35%. The median was 5.6%. Nationally, secondary schools with higher levels of known eligibility for free school meals had a higher turnover, although the link was not strong.

There are considerable differences in mobility by area (Figure 1). The average turnover (as measured by the mean) in inner London secondary schools is 14.2%, double the level found in any other area. If leaving and joining were distributed evenly through Key Stages 3 and 4, this would mean about half a year group changing between Year 7 and Year 11. Some secondary schools in other areas have comparable levels.

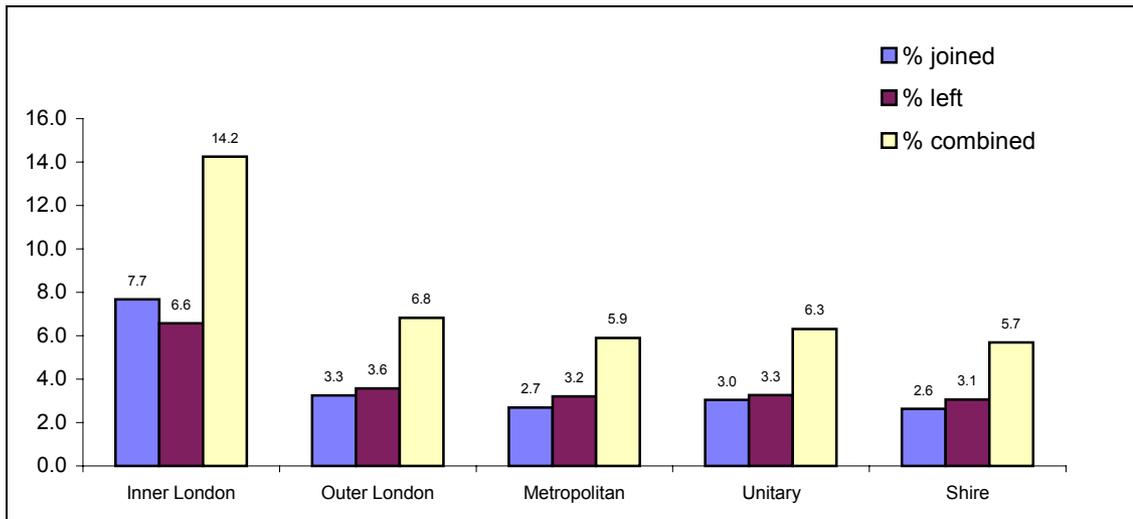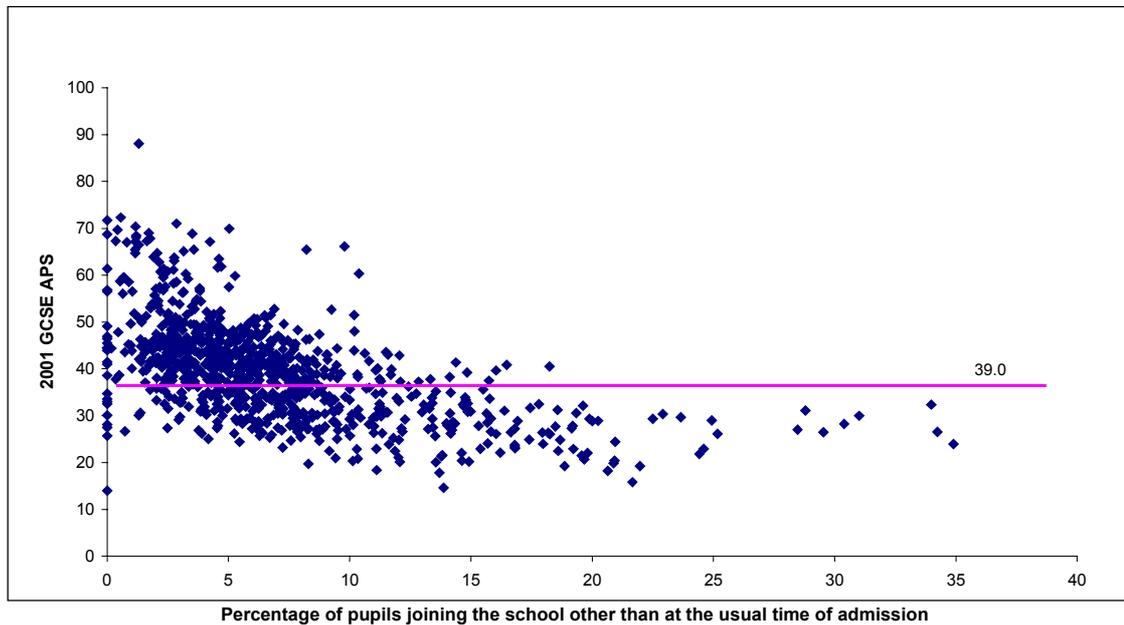**Figure 1: Pupil mobility by LEA type (2000/01)**

Figure 2 shows the relationship between mobility and average points score in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

Figure 2: Pupil mobility and GCSE average points score (APS) compared with the national average (2001)

The relationship is clearer than the equivalent for primary schools, although it is still not a strong one overall ($R^2=0.31$). Large variations exist between schools, particularly at lower mobility levels. Nevertheless, secondary schools with high mobility levels do tend to have lower results: almost all schools with mobility above 15% have average GCSE scores below the national average. However, since schools with higher mobility levels tend also to be those with higher levels of social disadvantage, lower GCSE results may be a consequence of the latter, rather than of mobility alone. Differences between schools in the relationship between mobility

and results also reflect the success different schools have in managing the effects of mobility.

Analysis of data by schools and LEAs

Some of the schools and LEAs held detailed data on mobility. The definition of mobility was not always the same. Some measured it by the number of in-year admissions; others included departures as well as arrivals; elsewhere, calculations only took account of single movements by particular pupils. There were also differences in the analysis of the relationship between mobility and attainment.

Not all the schools visited had analysed the relationship between mobility and attainment, but where they had, there was sometimes a strong negative correlation between the number of pupils with short careers in the school and the standards achieved at the end of a key stage. For example, in one London primary school, 135 pupils joined the roll in the course of a year. Of these, 40% were refugees, 30% were homeless and 28% had no previous schooling, with overlap between these categories. The health and welfare of many new pupils presented serious concerns. There were definite effects on overall attainment. In other cases, notably in smaller primary schools, turnover in Years 5 and 6 had a clear negative effect on Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test results.

The relationship between mobility and attainment was not, however, always clear. While there were schools in which longer-resident pupils did better than late arrivals, there were also schools where the opposite was the case.

It was clear that mobility has effects, and sometimes highly significant effects, on the work of the schools visited. It was difficult to distinguish the influence mobility has on attainment from that of other factors, notably social deprivation and disrupted family life. Even so, it was possible to see the effectiveness of schools' strategies to minimise the effects of mobility on pupils' well-being and progress.

Managing mobility

There is a range of issues with which schools have to deal. The practical business of dealing with a new intake of pupils – interviewing parents and pupils, updating records, organising induction and providing equipment and materials – is time-consuming. Dealing with a steady trickle of newcomers from insecure and disadvantaged backgrounds is especially demanding. The school may need to take account of special educational needs for which provision is not immediately available. Some children arriving at a school are emotionally unsettled and need exceptional levels of support. Among other things, they have been separated from friends or from families. Some have very little experience of schooling.

Making adequate assessment of pupils' educational experience and attainment is a key task. The most common complaints made by pupils interviewed in this survey

were that they had done work before or that they did not know what was going on in particular subjects. Even when records and samples of work are available, teachers still need to assess new pupils individually. When pupils arrive at very short notice, the need to settle them in quickly can work against the process required to get the provision right. A false start can have serious consequences, both for the pupils concerned and for the groups they join.

These difficulties tend to be greater in secondary schools than in primary schools. The National Curriculum, together with the national literacy and numeracy strategies, promotes consistency of provision and helps reduce the effect of mobility at primary level. Greater flexibility at Key Stage 3 and beyond increases the difficulty of connecting provision with previous work and makes it harder for new pupils to catch up.

Secondary schools face particular problems in providing continuity for pupils who move schools at Key Stage 4. Examination syllabuses may be different, options previously pursued may not be available and completed coursework may not reach the new school for some time.

Naturally, admissions at other than standard times cause schools more difficulty than departures. Nevertheless, confirmation of departure and the new whereabouts of pupils can take time and research, as can collating information on the curriculum covered by and the attainment of pupils who leave.

Having staff with the time to deal with these problems is, of course, a significant issue. Some LEA budget schemes allow funding to be provided mid-year so that staffing can be increased to cope with them, but a common problem is that the triggers for such funding are usually based on large percentage increases in the school population. This means the funding does not reach schools with a steady stream of new arrivals matched by roughly the same number of departures.

Effective school practice

As the case studies given in the annex emphasise, mobility comes in different forms and is of different scales. For some schools the problems of management are acute, but good management, such as the organisation of appropriate induction and personal support for new pupils, plays an important role in mitigating the effects of mobility.

The systems used by schools to manage mobility vary. For example, schools catering for relatively large numbers of new or departing pupils from the same background – such as children of refugee families from the same area, or the children of military families involved in the same posting – could organise support in a more concentrated way than schools catering for pupils of different backgrounds who arrived periodically.

The schools visited had different degrees of success in reducing the negative effects of high mobility levels. The following features were common to more effective approaches:

- relationships with parents and carers were forged quickly, through interpreters where necessary;

- issues of immediate concern – such as medical conditions, systems of contact, school uniform, free school meals and homework – were dealt with efficiently;

- pupils received information packs, prompt induction to school routines and personal support, for example through the help of a well-briefed 'buddy';

- information on attainment, including previous coursework at secondary level, was obtained as quickly as possible from pupils' previous schools. This, together with the results of assessments of new pupils on arrival, was disseminated promptly to class and subject teachers;

- new pupils were placed in appropriate teaching groups. At secondary level, this took account of the options pupils had taken at their previous schools. Existing pupils in these groups were prepared for the new arrivals;

- staff discussed schemes of work with new pupils to establish their familiarity with the work and what needed to be done to fill any gaps in knowledge.

In schools that managed high mobility levels well, key stage co-ordinators or heads of year made sure that, among other things, new arrivals received details of curriculum content in an accessible printed format, and that class or subject teachers went through the work with each pupil to identify areas of familiarity or concern. Office staff relieved teaching staff of the administrative burden. The schools regularly checked how pupils were settling in and coping with their work.

Support from LEAs

LEAs can help to remedy some of the problems associated with high pupil mobility by:

- monitoring mobility and, where possible, managing the level of additional admissions to schools already experiencing high levels of disadvantage and instability;

- helping schools in their contacts with other agencies such as housing, social services, education welfare and the voluntary sector, and avoiding unnecessary pupil movement as a result of other agencies' decisions;

- making arrangements with neighbouring LEAs to allow education welfare services to cross authority boundaries;

- using specific funding sensitively to help schools with high mobility levels, for example by allocating 'dowries' to accompany children to new schools;

- making sure that schools know about and can access specific provision, such as that for Traveller children, refugees and pupils learning English as an additional language;

- developing systems to ensure the speedy transfer of information from the pupils' previous schools.

Annex: Case Studies

Case study 1

In one West Country primary school, high mobility levels are associated with the movement of Traveller families in what is otherwise a fairly settled, though economically depressed area.

Some of the Traveller children were old enough to be in Year 6 but they had been placed in Year 5. One child had a statement of special educational needs and received support in the mornings for work in core subjects. The low levels of attainment in reading and writing of two children in particular had a major influence on their behaviour.

The local Traveller Support Service had tried to help the children to learn in school, but had been hit by staff illness and absence, making communication with the local camp-site less effective. It was hard for the school to stay in touch with parents and children who move seasonally to other parts of the country. Because information on the children was erratic, it was also difficult for the school to provide support for the pupils, for example in synchronising the input of educational psychologists and reporting to parents.

Case study 2

The intake of a secondary school in southern England is drawn from the local garrison town and some surrounding isolated villages. The town's population profile shows that only 12% of the housing is owner-occupied. Almost 90% of the population is under 45, and 26% is below the age of 10. Most army personnel move within 18 to 24 months. The 1991 census indicated that 45% of the town's population had a different address in 1990. Most of the soldiers spend a great deal of time away on frontline duties, leaving dependants behind. Many of the young mothers lack extended family support. Only 4.1% of the town's population has higher education qualifications.

About 25% of pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 did not join the school in Year 7. For Year 8, the figure is 18%. The figure for Year 7 had reached 10% by the spring term. Some of the children interviewed were on their fifth or sixth school, and none had been to fewer than four.

The school worked hard to give newcomers a secure start. Sport, games and lunchtime activities were all cited as being helpful in forming friendships and becoming involved in the life of the school. The children said that losing their friends from their previous schools was the most difficult aspect of the move. Getting used to new homework demands and work patterns had also been difficult.

The school recognised the need to help pupils build secure relationships, given that the ephemeral nature of relationships in their lives is a major source of personal insecurity. At Key Stage 4, pupils who arrive having worked on syllabuses from different examination boards are helped by subject teachers and are sometimes taught separately.

Case study 3

One London primary school has no major turbulence but a constant trickle of new arrivals and departures. The Year 6 cohort who sat Key Stage 2 tests in 1999 contained only 22 of the original 43 pupils who joined the school from the nursery. The school has a database which all teachers can use. It holds information on ethnicity, home language, scores in reading and spelling tests, and National Curriculum test results and targets.

The school meets the needs of mobile children well. The 1999 Key Stage 2 cohort consistently achieved Level 4 or above in all the core subjects. The rate for pupils with unbroken progress from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 was 60%, and for those who joined between key stages, it was 55%. This difference is much smaller than in some of the other schools visited.

The school tries to spread the burden of new arrivals among teachers. It works hard to create the right make-up of groups to encourage positive interaction in class. Some of the school's greatest successes are with pupils whose initial profile looked least promising; for instance, children from a local refuge or pupils with a history of disruptive behaviour.

The school noted two particular dilemmas. First, with a waiting list to see an educational psychologist, the school was concerned about new arrivals jumping the queue. Second, when a child disappeared from the school, the school, already hard pressed, was concerned about how long it should spend trying to establish whether to take the child off the register and where to transfer educational records.

Case study 4

A primary school in the south-west of England faced a very different set of problems. It has been popular and successful over the years, but demographic changes have meant that it has had to cope with a high turnover of pupils. Many new pupils have complex personal difficulties or exhibit behavioural problems. Late admissions constituted half of those on the school's 'at risk' roll, and two-fifths were on its special educational needs register.

One group of 60 pupils arrived following the closure of a neighbouring school. At the same time, the rate of casual admissions took the school's roll from 420 to over 480. Some 90% of the casual admissions came from outside the LEA area, which meant that records were of different kinds and were frequently late or unavailable.

These admissions – and in some cases rapid subsequent departures – made a considerable call on staff time, planning and resources. In the month before the visit, there had already been 12 new arrivals and 8 departures. Teaching groups needed to be reorganised and classrooms re-equipped. The LEA's budget scheme made no provision for high levels of turnover within the year, and there appeared to be no scope to increase the support from LEA pupil services or other agencies.

The school's induction programme was well designed. Its assessment systems were strong and individual pupils received good support. Good liaison existed with other schools and agencies, with the headteacher playing a leading role. The compilation and communication of assessments and other pupil-related information were managed efficiently.

Case study 5

A secondary school in London has pupils from a very wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds, including nearly 200 pupils from refugee families from 29 countries. Bilingual learners are distributed throughout the school and 50 languages are spoken at home.

In the school's current Year 10, just over 50% of the pupils had been in the school since the beginning of Year 7. Some 20% had joined in Year 9. A large number of other pupils had also come and gone since Year 7.

Funds from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant were vital in paying for teachers, bilingual and refugee support and providing home-to-school links. However, the demands on other teachers' planning, assessment and record-keeping duties (including individual education plans and pastoral support programmes) were clearly very great. The sheer variety of the school's casual intake meant these demands stretched the school's resources to the limit.

Nevertheless, the pupils who were interviewed were very satisfied with the welcome, the provision and the challenge with which the school had greeted them. They also felt that the opportunity to stay in the same environment for post-16 courses had a stabilising effect upon them.