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The Effects of Student Mobility on Student Achievement

Gail Gallaher

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between student mobility and student reading achievement in a small middle Georgia elementary School. Data obtained from student records revealed only a weak, negative relationship which was stronger for girls and students in fourth and fifth grades. The failure of this study to find a strong negative correlation with the number of moves from school to school in this set of students may be evidence of the effectiveness of multiple interventions by a strong leader, a responsive school system, and concerned teachers in a small school. Students passed their 2005 state test in reading at an 83% rate up from 27% in 1999. Improvements at Lindsey include the adoption of balanced literacy, vertical teaming, teacher empowerment, and exposure to a series of professional books.

INTRODUCTION

As the precepts of accountability, Average Yearly Progress, and No Child Left Behind continue, impediments to continuity of student learning need to be identified. Unfortunately, some impediments are out of the purview of the school's influence. Factors such as home nutrition, family relationships, exposure to toxins, and negative community influences such as gangs can all affect school performance. Schools are saddled with a school-centered responsibility to improve student achievement and continuity (Offenberg, 2004). Regular attendance can assure this continuity. However, student mobility is a barrier to stability especially when students are highly mobile. Now, as Georgia moves to determine whether or not students will pass or fail their grade dependent

upon their performance on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test, learning how this mobility affects students becomes essential.

Antecedents to student mobility identified include housing changes, income difficulties, and family changes such as divorce or other relationship issues (Fisher, Matthews, Stafford, & Nakagawa, 2002). The demographics for geographical mobility show poverty-level female headed households have more in-county moves than households of the same income levels headed by males. In fact, female headed households move more frequently, within the same county, than male headed households until the income of the household exceeds \$35,000, when the trends start to reverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Teachers state their concerns about attempting to engage highly mobile students which include the students' behavior and attitude, their academics, and the extra time involved instructing them (Sanderson, 2003). Mobile students may come in to the classroom angry at having to move losing their friends and social status. These feelings can be compounded with the added factors of poverty which created the instability which necessitated the move. They are less likely to bond with their teachers and school community and more likely to repeat a grade and eventually drop out (Fisher et al, 2002; Schaff, 2003; Jennings, Kovalski, & Behrens, 2000).

Concerning their academics, children who are highly mobile and economically disadvantaged have the lowest capacity for adaptation to change at the beginning of their formal schooling. This starts them at a disadvantage considering the amount of time they may need to adjust to the move (Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000). Teachers face the additional challenge of spending time to review with the incoming students about material they have missed. Even though school districts have common curricula, different schools will pace the material differently and teach in varying sequences. This leads to curriculum incoherence and stretches the already thin resources of the teacher even further (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Parlady, 1999; Fisher et al. 2002).

As far back as 1994, the United States government was concerned about student mobility and its effect on student achievement and issued a report (United States General Accounting Office, 1994). They found that 30% of poverty level students had attended at least three different schools by third grade as opposed to 10% middle class students (Richardson, 2004). This mobility factor creates a gap in achievement that is not seen in more stable students (Barton, 2004).

With these indicators of problems for mobile students, schools would benefit from identification of these students and the awareness if they are struggling academically. The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between student mobility and student achievement on the CRCT at a middle Georgia Elementary School where most of the students are considered at risk of school failure. In 2000, this school had 27% of fourth grade students meeting expectations on the CRCT reading portion. However, by the 2004-2005 school year, 84% of the fourth grade students met expectations. We expected to find that the more times the student had changed schools, the poorer the student would perform on the Georgia CRCT in reading.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

Warner Robins, Georgia, has a total population of approximately 48,000. Of this number 62% are white and 32% black; 17% of total households are headed by females, and 11% are headed by women with children under the age of 18 (U. S. Census, 2004).

There are a cluster of elementary schools where it seems the students and their families move between. All of these schools are Title I schools. Four years ago, Dr. Ruth O'Dell (former principal of one of the schools) attempted to band these schools together, along with the corresponding middle and high schools, to form the Northside Collaborative. The intent was to support each other in an effort to obtain more resources since, as a Title I school, the financial base among the community is meager. Unfortunately, this collaborative is no longer active.

The school in this study is one of the older elementary schools in Warner Robins. It was built in 1951 and has grades Pre-K through fifth grade. The total student population is 355. There is school wide free lunch. The percentage of the special education population is 3%, and the EIP population is 7%. All 355 students that took the CRCT in the 2004-2005 school year were used for this study. Although there were 355 students enrolled, test scores were available for only 193 students. Also, students took the test in the spring of the 2004-2005 school year but are reported as being in the grade they would be in

for the school year 2005-2006. For example, second grade scores reflect 2004-2005 first grade students. Fifth grade students from 2004-2005 are in middle school, so their scores were not available.

INSTRUMENTATION

The Georgia Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT) reading scores for all students were used to measure achievement. The test has content validity because the questions are based on the objectives in the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum. The co-efficient alpha reliability is .80 or higher for all of the elementary level tests in reading and mathematics.

PROCEDURES

Permission was obtained from the current principal to use the data from the CRCT scores and the mobility data from student records. The CSCT score data were kept confidential. It was not deemed necessary to get permission from the parents of the students.

Once the data were obtained, they were entered into a spreadsheet according to each individual student's information. Each student entry showed the reading CRCT score, their grade level, how many schools they had attended, whether or not they received any special services, and whether or not they received Reading Recovery services. Reading Recovery is "a highly effective short-term intervention of one-on-one tutoring for low-achieving first graders" (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2004).

DESIGN

This was a correlation study. The reading scores were compared with each student's mobility rate. Also the scores of those who had attended this same school consistently were compared to those who had changed schools at least once using two group t-tests.

RESULTS

The reading CRCT score results were expected to be related to the number of moves the students had. For the group as a whole ($N = 169$), there was

a weak negative relationship ($r = -.18, p = .009$) which was statistically significant. The average number of moves was 2.4 ($SD = 1.7$) and the average reading CRCT score was 332 ($SD = 31$). Only 60 students had been at Lindsey consistently. When these students who had never moved were compared to the rest ($N = 109$), a paired t-test showed no statistically significant difference [$t(167) = -.35, p = .72$].

Also, the Pearson r was used to see if there was a relationship at different grade levels. The correlation was stronger at the higher grade levels. For the fifth grade $r = -.21, n = 45, p = .09$; in the fourth grade $r = -.28, n = 48, p = .03$; the third grade $r = -.11, n = 35, p = .27$; and for the second grade $r = -.17, n = 41, p = .15$. Finally, the data for girls and boys were analyzed separately. The correlation was also stronger for the female students. The girls had a correlation of $r = -.26, n = 82, p = .009$ and the boys had a correlation of $r = -.11, n = 87, p = .16$.

The means scores were analyzed (Table 1). Looking at the number of schools attended, most students averaged above the 300 passing level (meets expectations) with the exception of students that had attended seven schools.

DISCUSSION

The results of the data were in the expected direction. The more the students moved, the lower the scores. This was a negative correlation. This correlation was statistically significant but weak. However the correlation was stronger for girls and for students in the upper grades.

These results were not as expected, which was a strong, statistically significant negative correlation. As reported earlier, this school has made improvements, meeting AYP for six consecutive years and being named Title I Distinguished School. The efforts to improve learning at this school and other schools in the system are probably effecting the improvement in test scores. Previous research (Barton, 2004, and Mantzicopoulos and Knutson, 2001) rules out the possibility that the infrequency of moves was responsible for the weak correlation.

Therefore, since most students were passing the CRCT in spite of multiple moves, a reasonable assumption would be that this school and the school system became proactive and made positive changes, realizing that students in these situations are emotionally and academically affected.

In 1999, Dr. Ruth O'Dell became principal at this elementary school. A self-described "fixer", she came as a leader with a focus, who believed change and success came from teacher empowerment. Teachers indicated the two most crucial problems when she arrived were discipline and reading. To effectively deal with discipline, a Title 1 teacher and paraprofessional were assigned to a full-time In School Suspension program. There was a due process implemented so students were not "dumped" in ISS but placed there after all options were exhausted.

Another change was that this elementary school became involved with Literacy Collaborative from Georgia State University. Literacy Collaborative is an outgrowth of the Reading Recovery movement. It started at Ohio State University when a group of Reading Recovery teachers in local schools, along with university staff, wanted to find more effective ways to teach all children literacy (Literacy Collaborative, 2005). A Literacy Collaborative school is involved with Reading Recovery, trains a teacher to be a literacy coach, and that teacher returns to the school to coach other classroom teachers in effective literacy teaching (Georgia State University Literacy Collaborative, 1999). The teacher involved started bringing in Balanced Literacy with Guided Reading. Balanced Literacy "combines teacher-directed instruction and student-centered activities" (Cooper and Kiger, 2003). The instructional activities are reading and writing. Guided Reading has the teacher working with small groups of students that require work on similar strategies. Books are at an appropriate reading level (Fountas and Pinnell, 2001). The teacher started in lower grades, and eventually all grades were trained in balanced literacy and guided reading. In addition, grades were organized into vertical teams, and within grade levels planning days were scheduled for a half day per month. Substitutes were brought in to cover classes. Students that teachers felt were in danger of not passing the CRCT were targeted for intensive instruction. Educational plans were developed for these students, and school tutoring programs were implemented.

The entire building became focused on a school-wide curriculum calendar where all teachers were teaching the same reading strategies during the same grading period. Data driven instruction was implemented with the adoption of grade level benchmarks in reading, writing and math. Students were checked for benchmark attainment at the end of each grading period.

Ruth O'Dell also brought into the school an awareness of the professional literature available, and teachers embarked on a program of professional development. Books studied school-wide included *Understanding the Framework of Poverty* by Ruby Payne, *Strategies That Work* by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, *Reading Essentials* by Reggie Routman, *Mosaic of Thought* by Susan Zimmerman, and books by Robert Marzano.

The many committees in the school were streamlined to three: instructional, operational, and student issues. These teams meet during school hours so teachers did not feel as pressured about their after school time. A Better Seeking Team was implemented to help the school keep focus.

Parents and volunteers became more involved. Parents and Children Together (Pact TIME) created a higher level of parental involvement. With Robins Air Force Base a mentoring program was implemented where base employees mentored students. Other changes include smaller class size and a high level of special education collaboration.

Implemented from the county level would be the move to a balanced literacy program in elementary schools. In fact, during the last Language Arts textbook adoption, the materials adopted were leveled reading books and classroom libraries instead of a basal series.

The training of the Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers includes training by Dr. Judith Gasser from Texas Women's University in balanced literacy and guided reading instruction. Therefore, when students within the county move, their reading instruction can keep continuity. The county has also increased the number of literacy coaches within the county elementary schools as well as now implementing EIP math teachers.

As schools are trying to offer all students opportunity, it seems that this school and other school district elementary schools are moving in the right direction. Improvements included the adoption of balanced literacy, vertical teaming, teacher empowerment, and exposure to a series of professional books. None of the interventions listed are unique, but when there is focus within the school and county, results can be positive. The failure of this study to find a strong negative correlation with the number of moves from school to school in this set of students may be evidence of the effectiveness of multiple interventions by a strong leader, a responsive school system, and concerned teachers in a small school.

APPENDIX

Table 1

Mean of Reading CRCT Scores Per Move

| Number of Schools | Mean | S.D. | <u>n</u> |
|-------------------|------|------|----------|
| 1 | 331 | 34 | 60 |
| 2 | 335 | 29 | 56 |
| 3 | 345 | 25 | 34 |
| 4 | 332 | 31 | 19 |
| 5 | 311 | 28 | 15 |
| 6 | n/a | n/a | 0 |
| 7 | 295 | 12 | 6 |
| 8 | 300 | 42 | 2 |
| 10 | 300 | n/a | 1 |

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