

Principal's Sabbatical Report

What impact has the increase in dairying had on rural schools and their communities in New Zealand?

The purpose of this Sabbatical was to investigate and consider:

- A. The impact of increasing dairy-farm-related transience on rural schools and their communities.
- B. Practices and strategies for positive and effective transitions of students who move frequently between schools.



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Introduction

This sabbatical was undertaken in Term 3, 2011. The study was a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology.

The investigation was carried out through an interviewing process (either face to face, telephone, email) using guiding questions. With the permission of the participants the interviews were recorded by dictaphone and later transcribed.

The participants included:

- school principals (11), three of whom were from area schools
- classroom teachers (14),
- a school counsellor
- a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB),
- a selection of primary and secondary school students (10),
- dairy employers (4),
- dairy industry personnel and sector support groups from rural dairying communities within the South Island (3),

Personnel from the Ministry of Education were also contacted.

A literature search revealed information in relation to transiency but nothing particularly applying to dairying. However the outcomes of this project are similar to transiency in other contexts and will contribute to the global understandings of transiency.

Acknowledgements

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- the staff of Carew Peel Forest School who took on extra responsibilities in my absence.
- the Sabbatical scheme that enables a teaching principal time and space to investigate an issue such as this, which is having a significant impact on our school and district.
- the participants for taking time away from their busy schedules to discuss their experiences for the purposes of this study.
- my long standing mentor and friend, who acted as my “sounding board” and guide.
- a colleague and friend who assisted me with the final editing and proof reading process.

Purpose

The purpose of this Sabbatical was to investigate and consider:

A. The impact of increasing dairy-farm-related transience on rural schools and their communities.

B. Practices and strategies for positive and effective transitions of students who move frequently between schools.

Background

With massive changes away from traditional farming practices to dairying in our community (and region), we are faced with a constantly changing school population. This has also seen an increase in the number of students who change schools regularly, often annually. Student achievement data suggests that many of these students are disadvantaged academically and they require extra support. They also need support to deal with other day-to-day issues such as relating to others and

changing home circumstances that often impacts on their learning and the learning of others around them.

These students are at risk of slipping through the system and being put in the ‘too hard’ basket. Dr Avis Glaze (Member of the independent advisory group for National Standards) emphasises that there can be *No throw-away kids*, with every child, no matter from what background, deserving to learn to their potential.

Changing demographics in rural areas mean that schools could be in danger of losing their ‘sense of community’. With other demands taking priority for families, commitment and service to the school and community is diminishing and responsibility often lies with an overburdened few. Schools are therefore challenged to sustain *Whanaungatanga*, their sense of community.

Rural schools often have common issues to deal with. The emergent issues relating to dairying are additional challenges.

This study will contribute to better knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the impact on rural schools and their communities, where farming practices have changed to dairying, resulting in a growing population of transient students and enhanced practices and strategies for positive and effective transition of students who move frequently between schools.

Data collection and Analysis

Contacts were arranged for a representative sampling of schools within communities where dairying has increased, and personnel within the dairying industry and support sectors.

Guiding questions (see appendix 1) were used to initiate the conversation and in all cases led the discussion as appropriate to their contexts. Prompts were offered to elaborate or obtain extra information relevant to different contexts.

Interviews were transcribed and these provided the data for analysis. An initial sweep of the data identified emerging themes. A second sweep reinforced the themes and data was chunked into these themes.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data. These were **Students**, **Schools**, **Community** and the **Farming sector**. Under each theme there are sub-themes. Having identified these themes and sub-themes it is possible to demonstrate some outcomes and make some suggestions to address the impact of dairy-related transience in rural schools.

Theme 1: Students

(a) Impact on Learning

While the general perception may be that learning for these students is adversely affected by moving from school to school, these data suggest variability in academic achievement.

Older students comment that adapting to different settings is a challenge but is most often positive. Older students appear to understand their levels of learning better

than younger students and adjust to changing expectations. Understanding and acceptance of timeframes appears to have a positive impact on commitment to learning. A principal commented that when a year four student was assured by her mother that would not be moving until she was in year eight, *she changed overnight, settled down, engaged and she achieved*. A year twelve student currently attending her seventh school, when commenting on her learning said,

It's harder when you are older, like when I was younger I didn't really know what was going on, so moving, it was quite exciting, but especially with this last move, it was really, really hard, especially with NCEA. It was just like....ohhhh... another school! This is a real a big move. After 9 months I love it, I'll be really annoyed if I had to move again.

Younger students (Years 1 – 8) appear more accepting of continual change and see it as an adventure rather than a barrier to their learning. Younger students commented:

It's good, I like to go to new farms and explore and I like exploring new schools, different houses.

You learn new skills, fix things for yourself, use your imagination to play games. It's quite fun, you get to live in different houses, you can get money for jobs.

For some younger students, lack of attention to homework including reading mileage, tends to impact on the success of their learning. A teacher commented, *Homework goes down a bit, they can't support the reading as much as we like, so we see gaps occur there*.

Some students were quite goal focused and saw their future in the dairying industry as a motivator. One year eight student stated, *My future job is to be a farmer. I love farm work and motor bikes and stuff*.

The learning needs of transient students who may need learning support to come up to standards appears to be acknowledged and addressed. However there is a hidden danger for those students who may be gifted or talented, to not be identified and supported because they shift so often.

(b) Impact on Social Interactions

Most students could articulate that when their social needs were met and they were supported through the initial transition period this had a positive impact on their readiness to resume learning. Most of the students spoken to thought they had integrated successfully into their new schools and could readily articulate what helped them fit in. This included introductions and being shown around the school, staff and students being friendly, welcoming and helpful, 'buddying' and knowing about a child's history so they can be 'buddied' with a student with similar interests. Older students had given thought to the way they had chosen to act. A Year 12 stated that, *I keep quiet at first and suss everyone out and quickly you find out who you want to hang out with*.

Students react differently to constant change. A principal commented, *some come in being friendly and quiet and holding back and they are accepted very quickly. If they come in wanting to prove they are "Mr Tough guy", they are marginalized*.

Several comments from teachers and principals suggest that often students who have attended a number of schools are reluctant to make friends and form attachments that will be lost when they move again. A principal commented on a child who decided,

Not to set down roots and socialise or talk, because he thought what's the point, I'm gonna move. You could see this kid pull right back and just become a loner. That was his coping mechanism.

Students appear to adapt and learn social skills relevant to their situation. A year twelve student commented,

The good thing is that you get a completely fresh start, no-one knows who you are. The bad thing is you have got to go through the process of making friends again, risk losing your other friends as you lose contact with them. Year twelve camp helped me a lot, I don't know where I'd be without that.

A year 8 student who had attended seven schools stated, *It was a bit strange at first, but I am kind of used to going to a new school and finding different friends, 'cause I've done it so many times.*

Students seem to accept that they have little choice, would probably like to be more stable but as they can't do anything about it they just get on with it. While appearing to adapt and cope it is often an emotional time for them, in particular, for older students,

I knew it was coming, I saw them looking for and circling jobs. They might have left them there on purpose for me to find out myself. I wasn't very happy though. ... I cried when I had to leave, I loved it up there.

Principals suggest it can be a challenge for long-term students to accept continual waves of transient students in and out of their schools. One principal commented, *Our kids are not all that good at times at accepting kids part way through the year, particularly if they are different. I don't know if that is typical of schools in our situation.* However principals show willingness and commitment to support transient students as well as supporting their local students to take on a mentoring roll.

We try and nurture our local students and make sure they are quite confident leaders. When they feel they belong, then the transient ones that come in slot within. Local children develop a sense of ownership of their school and new students instantly feel they have come into a family. There is no 'us and them'.

An area school principal commented

Quite often there is an adjustment in the pecking order in the playground with these kids arriving, regularly with boys there's a fight, early on, or a punch thrown or an upset kid because they have said something or been hit. We don't have a lot of that, very little of

it, but if we are going to have it, it will be in second or third week of them arriving.

The principal also commented that school activities such as sport appear to be important factor into integrating transient students into the school setting.

For a good number of them it's sport, they arrive in here around gypsy day and the rugby season is underway and they fit in with a group of boys or girls if its netball so the sport makes them welcome, and they feel welcomed. We probably have more support from Mum than Dad in those situations. I don't see the dads, I see the mums a lot and the kids get carted to sport. They are busy parents.

Transiency appears to impact on students forming strong and lasting peer relationships. An area school principal commented,

One thing I have noticed and I'm only generalising again, they leave without strong relationships with our students, I don't hear our students wanting to make contact with them, I don't see them come back into the school after they leave cause we've got something on and they have got great mates here, they certainly come and go without notice almost, they certainly go without notice, no one really cares that they leave, they've gone, whereas other kids that have been with us a lot longer, there are group hugs and morning tea shouts in the home room, and none of that happens.

(c) Impact on Wellbeing

Principals and teachers expressed concern for the welfare of some of their students. They commented that parents

tend to work incredibly long hours and so don't always have time to spend with their children. They are very busy and sometimes children are left home alone while parents are in the cowshed.

There is not the same family back up. When they are sick they still come to school because noone's available at home. If they go home they may be bundled up and taken to the calf shed. They grow up quickly and children are often very tired. There may be clothing issues, some are not getting breakfast".

Principals and teachers expressed concern about the quality of lunches and it was common for lunch boxes to contain mainly commercially produced product.

There are times during the year, at calving and at the end of milking that are particularly stressful and tiring on parents who work extremely long hours with few days off. A teacher commented *Calving time is difficult, the mums are involved and busy, and often children are left to fend for themselves.* A counselor commented *sparks fly really quickly and the kids talk about what it's like, things turning to custard at home, violence, anger... Mum's leaving Dad cause she's not putting up with it anymore. I have several situations over calving every year. It's a hard time.*

A group of teachers expressed caution in making broad statements about apparent neglect saying they *needed to be careful as there are children who have parents who are extremely busy but are 'good' parents... they have set up their cowsheds or a caravan nearby with everything for the children.* There were other examples where improvements had been made to facilities to allow children to be in safe proximity to their working parents for example playrooms built into cowsheds with glass screening between the shed and play area.

Theme 2: Schools

(a) Teachers

Most teachers appeared to be accepting of the implications of dairying and the impact it has on their practice. However, they acknowledge an increased workload in understanding new students and accessing information about their learning and social competencies. Teachers commented:

The big thing is gypsy day, the weeks prior and the weeks after, in that you started your routines in February and then you actually almost start again, another set of training children up in the middle of the year, testing and establishing their learning needs.

We apply to RTLB and Special Ed for help and by the time you have got it in place, they have gone again. We have had several like that. We have had 3 kids start reading recovery and leave, and that's even more frustrating. When they go to the next school they are supposed to be taken up.

Most teachers expressed frustration of not knowing when students were arriving at their school and the unpredictability of numbers. This caused immediate issues of finding resources and spaces for accommodating these students.

Their perception is that many students are behind academically and they notice a range of different work attitudes. This is often associated with the number of schools attended and the level of support students receive from home. Homework is often not completed and teachers tend to set tasks that can be done without home supervision. Many teachers devote extra time to listen to the children's 'homework' reading at school.

Teachers allocate time to integrate new students into the culture of their class and develop their sense of belonging within the school. *Rebuilding the class and the school culture is the real problem in the smaller schools. It can really change the culture when they come.* Teachers are sensitive to children's needs and reading their emotions, and they endeavour to do the very best to meet the range of learning needs. They express frustration when students stay for a limited time, *they come in with problems, you help them and then they move on again - it's frustrating.* Teachers also express the emotional attachment they form with their students, *when you say goodbye to these students it is emotionally exhausting. Your heart breaks for some of these children.*

(b) Principals

Schools in dairying communities experience a very high, variable and fluctuating turnover of students causing an element of instability. One school doubled its roll

within two years and another school had almost fifty percent turnover of their roll within a year.

One year we had 16 kids arrive in term 2 around the June / July period, and in term 3 it was like a rolling door, they were coming and going all the time. There were high needs kids, behaviourally and learning, and that was quite stressful actually when you look back on that for the school.

We are probably turning over a classroom worth of children out, and a classroom worth of children in... over 6 classrooms and that makes it really tricky...

The 1st June “gypsy day” has always been the traditional time when families move and students enrol at new schools, but nowadays this has changed and students can arrive in waves throughout the year. All principals exhibited frustration at the unpredictability and the uncertainty of enrolment numbers as there is often no forward communication made by families of their arrival. Often families leave without notification. An RTLB who had conducted research in the cluster of schools she was involved with, found that: 27% gave no notification to schools when coming in, 24% between one and three weeks notification and 49% four weeks notification and 30% left with out notification. She stressed, *it’s about meeting the kids needs really and assimilating them into the school. The most important thing is knowing, knowing that these children are coming.*”

Unpredictable and uncertain roll numbers clearly result in many issues, complications and implications for schools. One principal commented that

the biggest impact has been in the fact is that it all happens so quickly and that as they walk through the door they need chairs, they need desks, they need text books and that is all coming out of funding that has been allocated at a previous time ...just keeping up with the resources for the extra children and obviously that’s taking away funding that could be used for other areas.

Principals highlight the extra administration workload and “bottle necks” that are created during the year. A principal commented, *“The enrolment and removal of a child from a school is not a five minute job and when you are turning over 60 kids with enrolments and leaving, it is a huge burden on the office.”*

All principals have difficulty predicting student numbers for roll returns and consequently face issues around funding and staffing their schools. Many principals strongly felt the Ministry of Education July 1 Roll Return does not work for dairying schools. This is because large numbers of students often leave in June, rolls suffer a significant decline recorded at the time of the July 1 Roll Return count, and then enrolments increase significantly again after the July 1 roll return. Principals are then faced with a shortage of funding and time consuming paperwork completing applications for staffing and funding reviews.

The July 1 roll return is a disaster for a dairy school because we do not have the kids coming back in on July 1 and so that just completely throws out our ‘ops’ grant. We can project forward where we think we’ll be and yes we can end up getting there but on

July the 1st we have hardly grown and so our budgets are just screwed everywhere. We get to the middle of the year suddenly going 'oh they are going to take off \$10.000', because we don't have the kids, and three weeks later we do have the kids!

One Area school principal commented on the negative impact on funding and budgeting for secondary and area schools in dairying areas, caused by the Ministry changing to quarterly roll funding for years 9-13 students. Secondary students who have attracted funding at secondary, may leave and be replaced by primary students who attract different level of funding. This has an impact on staffing secondary classes, curriculum options and budgeting.

I lost funding for 3 months. I will get some back. It's pretty haphazard. I can't put a budget together. The impact of dairying is secondary, the primary impact is government policy.

Principals complain of the huge discrepancy in funding across the decile levels for size equivalent schools. They feel schools in dairying areas are disadvantaged by high decile rankings that are linked to high land values and that transient factors in the population are not given due consideration.

Our decile rating is flawed because of high land value and other factors. For a decile 8 school, our most recent enrolments are definitely lower decile, I guess our ability to cope with that is what we are most threatened with.

We are a decile 9, because the dairy farm prices have forced up our decile, we were decile 6 but when you have an asset that's worth millions, you suddenly appear very affluent. I say to people we are a decile 9 school with decile 1 transients.

Dairying schools that have a high decile rating will receive less in their Special Education Grant. One principal commented *my board funds most of it, its just a pittance, doesn't go anywhere.*

Principals struggle with meeting the needs of transient dairying students and the impact this has on student learning and wellbeing. All principals confirm that most transient students have high needs, learning deficits and are underachieving in the core areas of literacy and numeracy, when compared with students who have been in their school longer term.

I just notice the ability of the children coming in and coming through the school, that they are not where they are supposed to be at when they move onto another school. There just seems to be the constant shifts, not everyone, but more often we have ground to make up before we move forward.

The rate of transience varies with students attending between two and eight or more schools. Underachievement tends to be more pronounced in students who have attended several schools.

Principals commented on the need for many transient students to have individual programmes and the extra demand it places on resources. Principals expressed

concern for these students who are continually falling behind. One principal commented,

You lose about a terms worth of your education when you shift so you have a kid who has shifted twice in a year, they've only got one half of a year's learning. They are falling back all the time. We can have kids who have 3-4 schools in a year and so then these kids are just walking around with gaps all over the show. We try and plug them.

Principals express frustration and professional disappointment when assessments and programmes are put in place only to find students are on the move again. This sometimes makes it a challenge for principals to remain positive and highlights the need to support staff. The following statement reflects how teachers feel from a principal's position.

I am starting to feel now and it's a negative thought, that some of them are really time consuming because of behaviour and learning issues, and its hard to keep the momentum going knowing that they are more than likely to be out of here again in 11 or 12 months time. And I've got staff who are probably feeling a bit burnt about making a really good effort, working really, really hard for kids and then, they're off.

Many principals commented on their disappointment in not getting to know their students well enough.

We have had people who have disappeared within weeks, one started on a Monday and finished on a Friday. The senior staff, Board and PTA are saying ..I just don't know these children anymore.

We had ERO in term 3, half of the school had changed when they arrived, I didn't even know the kids!

Some transient students are achieving to expected level or above and one principal commented,

Those (students) achieving well tend to be the children of established families, higher order share milkers, parents who place value on education and want to move forward.

All principals are challenged when planning strategically in such an unpredictable situation. For example when considering property it is difficult to anticipate everything that may be needed in a five-year plan.

We planned for another room for assembly and storage space. We have got it on the five-year plan to improve. Now we have issues with sewerage and toilets, issues coming up from just sheer numbers.

Principals expressed frustration in planning strategically for budgeting and staffing. All schools had supportive Boards who were funding extra teaching or teacher aide

time to cater for the extra demand on student needs. One principal commented, *We go into debt to run support programmes for kids that come in with holes.* Another commented,

At the moment around the gypsy day period I have a teacher ready to go to do assessments, because the system doesn't work quick enough for them to come in. You can't expect or I don't want the classroom teacher to disrupt their programme to get a handle on that child. That works well for us but at the moment that comes at a cost to us. At the moment the Board sees that as a cost we pay.

Interruption to school programmes and the learning routine often occurs when dairy families take their holidays to suit the farming pattern rather than the school holiday pattern. Most principals were understanding of this issue and that it is often only in winter that families are able to holiday as a family. One principal took issue with the Ministry's absence criteria, *I think an overseas holiday is almost deemed a justified absence, but a New Zealand based holiday isn't, but a lot of families want to go back to see their families.*

Programme planning and class groupings also present problems:

You set your programmes and you do your planning at the end of the year for the coming year according to what you know. You do your staffing and teacher aide hours based on that, and then things change.

If you knew about it you could plan for it, but you can't plan for it, and classes end up bigger than they should be.

Many principals feel that Ministry timelines do not fit schools in dairying communities. One principal commented,

In some aspects I think we should have our strategic plan running from 1 June each year. There needs to be a bit of flexibility around strategic planning. Maybe it should be considered for predominantly dairy farming districts that maybe strategic planning and budgeting could run from June 1 – May 31".

Principals also express the difficulties relating to longitudinal data collation and analysis.

When presenting information it's hard to compare 'apples with apples'. We struggle to collect and analyse longitudinal data. We do it, and we have data that goes back years, but it is very hard to compare apples with apples because our cohort groups are so rotational. To be able to show progress on a school-wide basis becomes fraught, that is probably the best word.

That's the downfall of National Standards it doesn't take into account transient factors and where the kids have come at, I think they are beginning to realise this because they are talking about progress, to be able to show progress.

It is not always clear to the Board that we are not talking about the same kids or the same groups of kids from year 1 to year 6. We have about half ride us right through, and off they go. The other half is just completely rotational.

I don't know if the Ministry would be particularly supportive of us extracting children from our data and giving them 30 instead of 60 data points to work from... this is the danger of trying to compare over the years. We can probably compare a child from the start to the end of that child's year and be able to show progress hopefully for that child.

Setting annual targets for the beginning of a school year is problematic.

It's quite ludicrous for us to establish those at the beginning of the school year with the changes that we have. I must admit this year I have deliberately not set targets until just before the final deadline, when we knew the kids we were working with.

Principals face issues around delays in receiving student records and information from schools and other agencies. Sometimes no information comes with the student and sometimes principals do not know if there has already been organised support. This factor is supported by an RTLB project that identifies that notification between schools and other agencies is often delayed or not forwarded. Therefore students lose momentum when they do not immediately continue with their learning programmes.

And things take time. If they are on the GSE roll that information should be available immediately... We had one boy in particular we ended up suspending for his behaviour, but he had been in and because he was on the GSE roll their procedures for getting paperwork to were phenomenally archaic and slow. You know it should have been a case of ringing up, we need it now.

It is not a given that funding follows a student. When a student is eligible for Specialist Education funding the specialist teacher hours will follow them through the country, but the teacher aide hours are regionally based and there is no guarantee that it will continue. When a student who is receiving support from a RTLB moves schools it is caseload dependent whether the student will be taken on in the new RTLB cluster.

Schools would welcome financial support from the industry to meet this demand on school resources. A principal commented,

If I had one single wish from the industry and they wanted to do something to assist in a monetary way, it would be to give us money so that we can employ learning support teachers, so we have some flexibility in being able to respond to the need, because the industry is not going to change. There is always going to be a transient element to it.

All principals are experiencing a greater diversity of nationalities in their schools' communities as increasing numbers of migrant families come to live and work in

dairying communities. Principals view this extremely positively by broadening the horizons for New Zealand students in rural environments that have been mainly mono-cultural. *Different cultures coming in bring a different dimension to the school, it teaches the children to accept other people.*

Principals felt that ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students settled well into their new schools and adapted to a new culture. Students wanted to learn and displayed good work ethic. Principals felt that migrant families supported their new schools, viewed education as being very important and respected and valued teaching and teachers.

Principals acknowledge the need for school communities to work with families and students to integrate them into the school community. A principal commented, *We try and make them very much a part of our school and celebrate having them here.* One principal uses a 'google' translator to translate key parts of newsletters in the migrant families' own language.

Principals acknowledge the challenge of implementing programmes of work for migrant children and the extra workload on teachers particularly where nationalities change or increase in number. Though principals felt supported by ESOL coordinators and funding made available from the Ministry of Education for migrant learners one principal expressed a concern that, *ESOL coordinators were based in the city and not seen out in the rural areas very often.*

Principals appear to be continually introducing and adapting school systems to cope with growing transience. When given early advice of a student enrolling, many are becoming more proactive and phone the student's current school to gather information on learning needs. Some larger schools have moved heavily into composite classes to cater for the effect of transience, especially when large numbers come in at one year level. A principal commented,

We also did some changes in approaches to the way we taught a couple of 'inquiries'. We did family groupings when we started the 'inquiry' so we mixed the kids up across their age groups and started the inquiry in those family groupings and also mixed up the classes in terms of where they are located.

One principal uses a contract for families who take holidays in term time, encouraging them to make the most of the educational learning experiences and maintaining a reading habit with their children.

Some principals expressed that they experience less frustration now that they are more familiar with transience with one commenting, *The more students that we are getting, the more I think everybody's becoming more aware that, hey, we need help.* They welcome the support structures that are beginning to appear. For example in one region a RTLB had produced a useful information pamphlet on transience as a resource for schools and families, had arranged for; an article to be published in local papers, and radio advertising on farming programmes encouraging families to notify schools of their intentions.

Many schools arrange events to welcome and assimilate their families into their schools, for example, pot luck teas, family dance evenings, community socials.

Principals acknowledge the need to familiarise themselves with the dynamics of their farming community and of being sensitive and accommodating a pressure in the dairying calendar.

At certain times of the year there is more pressure on families and calving certainly would be the big one. We have to have a bit of give and take with the kids in terms of around learning at home and parental involvement. We try not to organise any trips at that time of the year if we can. Otherwise it tends to strain relationship a between the community and the school.

One mother said, 'We need to know at the start of the year so we can get the days off throughout the year, so we can book ahead and get that time off'.

All principals acknowledge that the key to engaging new families is in investing time with them to connect and build strong relationships. This will enable barriers to be broken down and show that schools care.

You begin to realise that Education is not going to work unless there is a strong partnership.

It's hard to get relationships going when several families start at one time, investing time in relationships pays off.

Theme 3: Community

(a)Support for community

Most principals commented on the dramatic changes their communities are experiencing (or have experienced) as traditional family owned sheep, beef and cropping land is sold to investors and converted to dairying.

Every farm that has been on the market in the 5 years I have been here made has always been sold to a dairy family or a dairy consortium of some description.

I guess we have had lots of continuity of stable families, up until recent times, gypsy day was not even a concept we were aware of a couple years ago.

A Board of Trustees chair (also a farmer) commented, *the huge dairy development 10 years ago has had a major impact on the school and community in general, a significant impact.*

It appears that as major development causes a shift away from family or smaller group ownership, communities become more diverse and more mobile with communities constantly changing. Therefore challenges and issues schools and communities face become more pronounced and often unpredictable.

A flow on effect is change to the social dynamics within the community.

I have the perception that dairy farmers as a general rule tend to run their operations in a quite a business like fashion, compared to the sheep farmers where I think it's a combination of business and lifestyle. (Principal)

The staff are employed for what they can get for the dollar, that sort of thing and so they are quite transient. Then there is a career progression as well and there is quite a distinct hierarchy. Those families that initially come in and rear calves for a season, they want to make their way up the chain and eventually become contract milkers or share milkers, and to do that they believe they have to move quite frequently. (Principal)

Dairy conversions bring more children into an area, particularly when the economy is more buoyant, resulting in growing school rolls. Although this brings significant change, most principals view it as being positive for the viability of rural schools. One principal commented,

It is good for kids in country schools in terms of there are generally more kids coming into the area versus the traditional generational family ownership where there might be 3 or 4 kids in the family, they leave school and then there's a lull.

In one traditional dairying community, geographically smaller than others, changes have resulted in a steady decline in the school roll. Farms have become larger with farmers buying up neighbouring farms and they have become more mechanised. The trend has been for managers to employ young, single labourers, which has threatened the school roll. The principal had noticed this trend beginning to reverse and commented that,

I have the feeling that as income has increased, farmers are wanting give more responsibility to employees on the farm so they can have more time for themselves. They are now employing older people with families, so we see those children coming into school.

With rapid change occurring, principals and teachers express concern and fear of losing a sense of community in their districts. One principal commented, *It's that sense of community and in this community there is a strong sense of community and I hope that continues, but I don't know.*

A teacher commented,

Once it was very exciting thing when a new family came to the school as it didn't happen very often. They were welcomed by the PTA, but people don't get welcomed into the community like that anymore.

With an increasing rate of mobility within communities, there appears to be less involvement in community. One principal suggested,

Many families are disconnected from their wider family groups in other parts of New Zealand, they haven't 'bought in' because they know, they are only going to be here for 2 years, 3 years at the most.

In some areas voluntary clubs are suffering from the problem of 'multi-volunteerism'. A principal commented,

The same people are volunteers on a whole variety of different things. Because the transient nature of the community, some people they are just not committing so there is less people around to do the same thing.

Principals stress the importance of maintaining relationships with existing and long-standing community members, so that knowledge of the school and community is not lost.

(b)Support for schools

All schools express concern about the loss of parental support that they once enjoyed in the past for school activities and events or to help at the traditional 'working bee'. This has forced many schools to direct school funds into these areas. A principal commented,

We had a very strong group of supporting parents, but when you are rolling over about a classroom worth of children, the level of community commitment that comes with level of transience is lower, maybe 1 in 5 of the families will commit and involve, the others don't.

Principals report that often it is the same parents who are volunteering to do the work, which can lead to negative feelings within the school community. Many schools have had to substantially reduce extra curricular activities such as school trips, sports and clubs activity days because it is just too hard to get the necessary support.

Principals suggest that families on short contracts hesitate to contribute to school life and this presents difficulties for fund raising. A principal commented,

Parents don't have the same motivation to join into fundraising because if they are fundraising for something for next year, they're probably not going to be there the next year, so they don't see any purpose in putting themselves out.

It was evident that levels of support were variable across school communities. A few enjoyed strong support from parent/school organisations that operated fundraising calf schemes in order to sponsor school activities such as annual ski trips, camps and provide extra staffing.

All principals received the commitment and support from a core group of parents. One commented,

We are pretty lucky we have got some reasonably committed parents with the school. We have just finished doing our middle of year consultations and running a survey for our big strategic plan re-development. Feedback from both shows everyone is pretty happy with what is happening at the moment, so I think all that that helps with families staying put too.

Another principal spoke of the success of the Board's recent community consultation and of the quality of information gathered when they held house meetings (or venue

of choice to meet cultural needs). The school had previously experienced lack of support when holding meetings at school and wanted to try another method. By reaching out into the community and engaging families in conversation, the principal gained valuable anecdotal information and insights that might not have been shared in a survey. This school was also fortunate that some new families were in healthy financial positions, chose to give donations to the school in lieu of time that they could not give. The principal commented,

The fact that it comes with almost no strings attached says to me 'we believe in what you are doing, we trust you and this is what we can do for you', so we spend it on people, teacher aide hours and that sort of thing.

It appears that though many farmers are unable to support schools with time, they give support in other ways, for example, loan of equipment trucks diggers etc, assisting financially to transport costs for camps.

Theme 4: Farming Sector

(a) The nature of contracts

It is evident from all parties spoken to, that the short length of contracts for workers within the dairy industry, of twelve months or less, is seen as a big issue. Principals and teachers strongly state that they would like one year contracts abandoned in favour of contracts that are two years or longer, because of the impact on families and children and their learning.

We put an awful lot of work into them, put a heap of work into them, and we feel as though we are getting them right and they move on. It is not a reflection of the kids, it is a reflection of the fact that the parents only have one year contracts, or parents aren't performing on the contract so they tend to move.

If you've got one year contracts, that moves them quickly. I think potentially they are the type of worker that ends up in a dairy farm at the very low level. It's very transient any way, they tend to move quite a lot because maybe this is where they can get a job. They get a job there, but as soon as it gets hard they are off.

However it is acknowledged that within any industry, that even if there were longer contracts there are workers who would only stay for a short time because of their own issues or lack of appropriate work skills and solid work ethic.

It appears that some families leave employment because of dissatisfaction with their employment conditions on the farm. It is evident that some of these families want stability for their children by trying to relocate to another farm in the area. In one area the school assisted families to find new positions. A teacher commented

If it doesn't work out on the farm and they like the school, a lot of these parents come to us. They say they want to stay at our school and can you find us a place. We have directed them to local farmers. The expectation was that we as a school would find them employment, which we thought was quite different.

Most families leave their current employment to progress through the dairying hierarchy and this opportunity is not always available on the current farm they are working on.

A principal shared what he considered was a rare example of a family that had moved up the scale working only at two farms. He suggested this was because both parties, employer and employee, were very family orientated.

It appears that workers who sign longer contracts are further up in the hierarchy involved in share milking, with a goal of owning their own farm and that these families are more likely to remain settled for their children's schooling.

(b) Employers

Principals and teachers are in a 'box-seat' position to observe and hear how families are feeling about their employment. They notice the farms that turn over staff quickly. Principals report a wide variation in farm owners and managers level of skill and competence to manage people, as many have come from backgrounds where they have not had to employ or manage people. A principal commented,

You have got the extremes. You have got the employer that sees their workers purely as a human resource they are paying to do a job and it's got to be done, and if I can get that job done as cheaply as possible that is fantastic, through to the other end of the spectrum which I think is growing, 'I have employed this person and I need to treat them as a whole person, and if they are happy in their job, and they are getting paid a reasonable amount of money, and their family is happy, I am likely to get a better performance out of them.

Employers also recognise this factor and express concern for the disrepute they bring to the industry. *Some are giving us a bad name because too many treat it to much as a business, it's more about money, not caring for the people or the land, it's production at all costs.*

One employer thought that employees within the industry suffered from broken promises and conditions and emphatically stated the three key conditions he aspired to provide for his staff: farm and housing conditions, showing appreciation with time off, and wages. He commented, *the third thing is the wages, but if you haven't got the other two sorted they are absolutely miserable.* He believed these factors resulted in his staff wanting to stay in his employment.

Employers showed interest in children's education and felt a responsibility to promote the local school. They encouraged families to go to school functions and events whenever possible. One stated it was sometimes *hard to get their buy in, when in their mind they are only there for one year.* One suggested school holiday time for dairy schools should be shifted to around June 1st to avoid interruption to children's schooling. Another spoke of the need to be conscious of the timing of changing farm positions to suit children's schooling, and preparing them to meet new challenges, new people, and giving them the confidence *we can go somewhere else and we will be ok.*

Employers spoke of the importance of education within the dairying sector, of its improved profile and the increased opportunities that dairying now offers. They

encouraged staff to improve qualifications, and one commented, *I had a little bit of education behind me. It's not like that now. Nowadays you have got to have 150% commitment towards the job or you are only going to be dragged through the industry.*

All employers showed concern for the pastoral care of their workers and the importance of 'growing' the staff and keeping them safe, motivated, interested and challenged. One commented,

A leader leads from the front, not from rear, and so you as a farm owner or employer have to appreciate what these people are doing for you, you have to guide them along the way. We need our staff on the same wave length ... we have to make them feel like they are a part of it.

A spokesperson from a support group within the sector commented,

An area we are putting some focus is around is good staff management, and as a relative newcomer to the industry it wasn't particularly clear why we would be doing that, but now I understand it so much better.

It was evident that many employers feel the weight of responsibility. One employer stated,

One of the biggest things that concerns me with dairy farming is the young people coming through, a lot of drugs and alcohol, and I think that gives dairying a bad name as well.

Another employer commented, *Catering for ethnicity is a big responsibility for employers.* With a growing number of migrant workers on farms there are often integration issues, seniority issues and cultural boundaries to understand and respect.

(c) Industry groups

In this study the implications of dairying in rural communities generated varying responses from the dairy industry as a whole. Comments from the industry ranged from:

Any social responsibility lies with farm owners and shareholders. All involved in the industry pay a levy for research and development. Their role is to look at wider implications of the industry.

to:

Our view is that education is particularly important for the future of our district and the country.

Principals feel that the industry is not fully aware of the impact that dairying has on schools and communities and it could and should show recognition of this and take action.

I think possibly within the dairy industry itself, there needs to be some more formal recognition and conversations going on around education itself. It is in their best long-term interest to have well educated kids coming through to continue on in the industry. I'm not

saying that it doesn't happen now but maybe a more formalised approach to it is needed.

Principals comment that dairy companies that are geographically close to their local schools support them with resources.

They are a good neighbour to us. If we are really stuck for something we can give them a ring and they may help us with people or product, and they are good with money too. They care for us and we appreciate that.

There appears to be a willingness from within the industry to acknowledge there are emerging considerations. A spokesperson from a sector group commented,

I am not directly involved in the education side of things but I am interested in it from a broader policy perspective, and I think often we overlook the implications of farming for communities and the social impact side of things, so that's why I was interested in making contact with you and finding out a bit more. That's an area we need to do more, we need to do more work to add layers to some of the discussion that we have.

Considerations

Analysis of the ideas within the four themes has led to the formulation of a comprehensive list of effective strategies and practices, and areas for further investigation, which could improve outcomes for students, families, schools and their communities. The three key stakeholders, the Ministry of Education, schools and the farming sector, could consider these.

The Ministry of Education could consider:

- a formalised definition of “transience”
- the manner in which transfer of information is managed
- funding for transients similar to that of other groups eg ESOL
- the tracking of transient students and those eligible for extra funding
- extra support for schools with ESOL students
- financial implications of roll returns and staffing entitlements
- decile ratings in dairying communities and their impact on schools’ Operations Grants
- flexibility of timelines for data collection, analysis and reporting
- acknowledgement of transient students as a specific cohort when reporting on school-wide data
- flexibility of school terms and holidays
- absence criteria in regard to families taking holidays within the school term
- the impact on resources and administration workload

Schools could consider:

- acknowledging transience and supporting staff to understand the nature and needs of transient students
- actively implementing strategies that help students and families adapt to their new class and school
- coaching and supporting existing “local” students to share the school’s core values with new students

- implementing ways of showing they accept and value new students
- coaching transient students in social skills towards successful integration
- celebrating “change-over” days and acknowledging arrivals and departures
- creating a school pamphlet that informs new families and employers about the nature and expectations of the school
- media releases to give practical ideas and support for parents and employers relating to transitions
- adapting expectations and involvement in school life to fit farming schedules
- allocation of funding to support programmes and systems relating to transiency
- being proactive in sharing of information between schools
- educating parents in the need to ensure continuous learning for their children

The farming sector could consider:

- the nature and timing of contracts with families in mind
- the nature and timing of contracts to fit in with the school year
- supporting parents to plan moves that fit with key points in children’s education
- supporting their local school through enhanced resourcing
- encouraging families to communicate with schools and notify them well in advance of their ‘coming or going’
- training employers and employees in recognising the social implications connected to transience
- continuing to support and encourage ongoing involvement in education towards tertiary study in the farming sector

Summary and Implications

This project investigated the impact of increasing dairy-farm-related transience on rural schools and their communities, and practices and strategies for positive and effective transitions of students who move frequently between schools. While the sample group was relatively small, the outcomes suggest that there is a need to formally acknowledge the concept of transiency within the dairying industry and the impact it has on rural schools and their communities.

Of primary concern is the impact that transiency could have on students and their learning. It is paramount that the Ministry of Education, schools, families and the industry, acknowledge this and work together to ensure that all students are supported to achieve success and meet the vision of The New Zealand Curriculum – ***confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners.***

In the words of a principal,

The ultimate fear is that if we don’t address this, we being the education system and the dairy industry, then there’s going to be a generation or generations of children who are not going to get a good deal.

Kay Ward
May 2012

Appendix 1: Guiding Questions

1. Principals and Teachers

Tell me about the impact of dairying on your school.

2. Students

*Tell me what it was like for you when you started at this school?
What is it like for you now?*

3. Employers

What structures are in place to support your dairy workers and their families in relation to the local school?

4. Industry

Do you have an education strategy – how are you supporting education?

Background Reading

Managing Transience: Good Practice in Primary Schools, April 2007, Education Review Office

Educational Issues for Communities Affected by Transience and Residential Mobility, Report on Phase 1 (2003–2004), Jane Gilbert

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