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Roots Without Soil: The Emotional and Psychological Impact of Frequent School Transitions on students

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Abstract

Frequent school changes can leave invisible yet lasting imprints on a student's emotional and psychological well-being. This study explores how repeated transitions—driven by parental transfers, migration, divorce, or displacement—shape identity, resilience, and learning continuity. Through eight representative case profiles from Indian and international contexts, including my own firsthand experience of having changed ten schools, this paper examines both the challenges and positive adaptations linked with educational mobility. Findings highlight that while school transitions often disrupt stability, they can also cultivate resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence when supported effectively by families and schools.

Keywords: School transitions, student mobility, emotional development, psychological impact, resilience, adaptability

Introduction

For most children, school represents continuity, friendships, and emotional security. Yet, for those who change schools frequently, education becomes a journey of constant beginnings and farewells. Known as high-mobility students, these learners often experience emotional, academic, and social challenges that influence their long-term development.

Research shows that repeated transitions may cause academic discontinuity, loss of self-esteem, and attachment difficulties (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008; Rumberger, 2003) [6, 9]. However, some students transform these experiences into opportunities for personal growth, building resilience, adaptability, and empathy.

This paper explores such contrasting outcomes through real and research-based student narratives, concluding with my own lived experience of attending ten different schools.

Objectives

- To understand the emotional and psychological effects of frequent school changes.
- To analyze how varied reasons for mobility influence outcomes.
- To explore resilience, adaptability, and identity formation among mobile students.
- To propose strategies for schools and families to support such students.

Methodology

This qualitative study uses narrative and case-based analysis drawn from existing research literature, counselling observations, and authentic student experiences.

The study also includes an auto ethnographic element based on my own journey. As a student who has changed ten schools due to parental transfers and a family bereavement, I (Hrishikesh Bansidhar) offer a firsthand account of how frequent transitions shaped my emotional growth, adaptability, and interpersonal understanding.

Case Study and Analysis

Case 1 Aarav Mehr (Name changed to protect identity) The Government Transfer Child (India)

Profile

Aarav, age 14, has attended six different schools due to his father's frequent government transfers across Maharashtra and Karnataka. Initially an outgoing and cheerful student,

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Aarav began showing signs of social withdrawal, reduced classroom participation, and mild anxiety after each move.

Psychological Impact

Repeated relocations disrupted Aarav's sense of stability and belonging, leading to feelings of detachment and uncertainty. According to Jelleyman and Spencer (2008) ^[6], children who move frequently are more prone to internalizing disorders such as anxiety or low self-esteem, especially when social ties are repeatedly severed.

In Aarav's case, theatre and debate offered him a corrective emotional experience—a structured, expressive outlet that rebuilt confidence. Participation in drama helped restore his social connectedness and self-concept, reflecting Erikson's (1963) ^[2] stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, where positive experiences reinforce identity development.

Impact Summary

Emotional withdrawal and academic inconsistency initially; recovery through creative engagement and peer acceptance

Case 2: Mia (Name changed to protect identity) — The Expat Learner (U.S. → Singapore → Dubai → India)

Profile

Mia, 16, has studied in four international schools due to her mother's global corporate career. She frequently faced language shifts, cultural dissonance, and a persistent feeling of being an "outsider."

Psychological Impact

Early transitions led to identity diffusion—a struggle to define herself amid changing cultural expectations. Pollock and Van Reken's (2009) ^[8] "Third Culture Kids" concept explains that such children often feel they belong "everywhere and nowhere."

However, Mia's exposure to diverse environments enhanced her cross-cultural competence and empathy, transforming confusion into self-assurance. By founding a multicultural club in her current school, she redefined her identity positively as a "global citizen," reflecting high emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) ^[5] and adaptive resilience

Impact Summary

Initial anxiety and identity conflict; long-term gain in global awareness, empathy, and cultural adaptability.

Case 3: Reya S (Name changed to protect identity) — The Curriculum Migrant (India)

Profile

Riya, 17, changed schools four times—moving between CBSE, ICSE, and IGCSE boards due to her father's private-sector relocations. She faced curriculum mismatch, exam stress, and fear of academic failure.

Psychological Impact

The frequent transitions led to academic anxiety and perfectionistic tendencies—symptoms often linked with performance-based self-worth (Flett & Hewitt, 2002) ^[4]. She began to equate her value with grades, leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced motivation.

Through counselling and mindfulness therapy, Riya learned emotional regulation and self-compassion, essential components of resilience (Werner & Smith, 1992) ^[11]. Her

emotional healing demonstrates how guided support can transform stress into self-awareness.

Impact Summary

Academic burnout and fear of failure; recovery through counselling, mindfulness, and emotional regulation.

Case 4: Kenji G (Name changed to protect identity) — The Diplomat's Son (Japan → France → India)

Profile

Kenji, 15, has lived in three countries and attended four international schools. Fluent in multiple languages, he excels academically but struggles emotionally, avoiding close friendships and expressing feelings through art.

Psychological Impact

Kenji displays traits of emotional guardedness and attachment insecurity (Bowlby, 1988) ^[2], often seen in children who repeatedly lose social anchors. The repeated detachment from peers created a defensive coping style—"don't get attached, so it won't hurt to leave."

Art therapy has helped him externalize suppressed emotions, aligning with creative expression as a therapeutic outlet (Malchiodi, 2012) ^[7]. His drawings of fragmented homes and floating figures symbolize the psychological state of "rootlessness," common among globally mobile youth.

Impact Summary

Emotional guardedness and avoidance of deep connections; healing through creative expression and artistic self-discovery.

Case 5: Sneha K (Name changed to protect identity) — The Child of Divorce (India)

Profile

Sneha, 12, divides her time between her mother in Delhi and father in Bangalore. Each shift between homes brings emotional strain and inconsistent schooling. Initially, Sneha showed clinginess, low self-esteem, and classroom passivity.

Psychological Impact

Parental separation often produces attachment insecurity and identity confusion in children (Amato, 2000) ^[1]. Sneha's fluctuating environment caused her to internalize feelings of rejection and uncertainty.

With regular therapy and expressive journaling, she learned to label and regulate emotions, developing emotional literacy and autonomy. Journaling served as a cognitive reappraisal tool, helping her convert distress into reflection and strength. Over time, Sneha evolved into a resilient and empathetic peer mentor.

Impact Summary

Emotional insecurity transformed into resilience and emotional articulation through therapeutic and reflective writing.

Case 6: Daniel (Name changed to protect identity) — The Refugee Learner (Syria → Germany → U.K.)

Profile

Daniel, 18, fled war-torn Syria at age 10 and attended multiple refugee and public schools across Europe. He

struggled with trauma symptoms—nightmares, flashbacks, and distrust of authority.

Psychological Impact

Research by Fazel *et al.* (2005) ^[3] shows that refugee children are at high risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, especially during early relocation stages. Daniel's initial isolation reflected trauma-induced avoidance and hypervigilance.

However, trauma-informed counselling and peer inclusion programs in his U.K. school enabled post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) ^[10]. Daniel now leads advocacy workshops for refugee rights, channeling past pain into purpose and leadership—a hallmark of emotional resilience.

Impact Summary

Severe trauma and identity disruption; transformed into advocacy, leadership, and post-traumatic growth through counselling.

Case 7: Priya J (Name changed to protect identity) — The Urban Migrant (India)

Profile

Priya, 15, belongs to a family of internal migrants who frequently move for daily-wage work. Her schooling has been interrupted several times, causing syllabus gaps and inconsistent attendance.

Psychological Impact

Priya's early life exemplifies educational discontinuity linked with poverty-based mobility. Studies (Rumberger, 2003) ^[9] highlight that such students often show learned helplessness and academic disengagement due to repeated failures and instability.

An NGO-run bridge school in Mumbai provided her with academic support and emotional mentoring. With consistent encouragement, she regained self-confidence and developed a strong sense of social purpose. Today, she tutors younger migrant children, representing the resilience-through-community model (Werner & Smith, 1992) ^[11].

Impact Summary

Early academic setbacks and social displacement; recovery through empowerment, mentorship, and peer teaching.

Case 8: My Story — Hrishikesh Bansidhar (India)

Profile

Growing up, school never felt like a fixed place—it was always changing. Over the years, I transitioned through ten different schools across India, each with its own culture, language, and expectations. These changes were largely driven by my parents' frequent job transfers, and later, by the profound personal loss of my father. Each new school brought the challenge of starting over—but also the opportunity to discover something new about myself and the world around me.

In the process, I experienced a wide range of academic environments, having studied under multiple educational boards including CBSE, ICSE, and the Cambridge International Curriculum. Each board had a unique approach to learning and assessment, which pushed me to adapt academically as well as socially. This diversity helped me develop a flexible mindset and a deeper appreciation for different learning styles and perspectives.

Psychological Impact

At first, the constant moving created feelings of anxiety and instability. I often found myself fearful of being the “new kid” again, and struggled with the emotional exhaustion of leaving behind friendships and familiar environments. These experiences align closely with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1963) ^[12], particularly the stage of identity versus role confusion—where a sense of continuity is essential for personal growth. Repeated transitions made it hard to establish that continuity.

However, over time, I began to approach each move not as a disruption, but as a chance to reset and grow. I learned to adapt quickly, understand different cultures, and communicate across linguistic and social boundaries. This ability to thrive despite adversity reflects the concept of resilience described by Werner and Smith (1992) ^[11], which emphasizes positive adaptation in the face of life's challenges.

The most difficult period came after the passing of my father. Grieving while adjusting to yet another new environment made emotional regulation even more difficult. Yet, it was during this time that the support of my mother and grandparents became a critical anchor. Their steady encouragement and emotional presence helped me make sense of the loss and continue moving forward. They reminded me that while change can be painful, it also brings growth—and that a sense of belonging can be built anywhere through openness and kindness.

Reflection

Now, as a student of New Era High School, Panchgani, I look back on my journey with gratitude. The frequent changes I once feared have shaped me into someone who is adaptable, culturally aware, and emotionally resilient. Exposure to multiple education systems and social contexts has prepared me for uncertainty, both academically and personally.

My story is a testament to how supportive relationships and an open mindset can transform constant change into a path of personal evolution and strength.

Impact Summary

Developed resilience, adaptability, empathy, and interpersonal strength through repeated transitions and reflective coping.

Discussion

The eight case studies show that frequent school changes affect students differently depending on the nature of the move and the emotional support received. Common challenges include:

- Difficulty maintaining long-term friendships
- Academic inconsistency and stress
- Feelings of isolation or identity loss

However, with emotional support and self-awareness, transitions can also build:

- Resilience and confidence
- Interpersonal intelligence and cultural sensitivity
- Strong adaptability to new environments

My own experience illustrates that with supportive family and teachers, frequent transitions can become pathways for growth rather than trauma. These findings align with

Pollock & Van Reken's (2009) ^[8] concept of Third Culture Kids and Werner & Smith's (1992) ^[11] resilience theory, both emphasizing adaptability as a form of psychological strength.

Recommendations

- Mentorship Programs: Schools should assign peer buddies for new students.
- Counselling Support: Provide transition counselling for at least six months after admission.
- Parental Awareness: Encourage parents to discuss upcoming moves openly to emotionally prepare children.
- Academic Bridging: Offer flexible support for syllabus gaps during transitions.
- Inclusive Culture: Celebrate new students' experiences as shared learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Frequent school transitions challenge emotional stability, but they can also foster extraordinary resilience. The key lies in how students are supported—by parents, teachers, and peers. My journey of ten schools has taught me that while roots may shift, growth continues. Every school left a mark, not of loss, but of learning.

When schools focus on emotional connection along with academics, every moving student can find belonging—no matter how often the walls around them change.

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