School-based Stakeholders' Perspectives on School Redesign and Social Dynamics

Context and issue

Students who experience school-based transitions may face a variety of challenges, including concerns about being bullied at the new school[1], building new relationships[2], and adjusting to a new social environment[3]. These challenges can negatively impact students' educational achievement[4,5] and result in higher levels of disciplinary measures after transition, especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds[3,6] and those who belong to racial minority groups[7,8]. On the other hand, research demonstrates that upon transitioning to a new school, students can especially benefit from a positive student–teacher relationship, as it can help create a sense of belonging for transitioning students[9]. An increase in students' sense of belonging can help minimize the negative effects of school transition on students' academic performance[4,10] and decrease the occurrence of bullying incidents in school[11].

Our approach

Though there is considerable evidence about the potential negative effects of school-based transitions, most of what we know is from research exploring transitions from elementary to middle/high school, transitions due to school closure, and transitions due to family relocation. Here, we report on findings from a research study examining how student social dynamics are affected by school transition due to the temporary closure of an elementary school undergoing school redesign and the concurrent redevelopment of the neighbourhood. This school, which is located in a low-income area in downtown Toronto, was closed down in 2011 and 2012 to go through a school redesign and rebuild. During this process, 'redesign school' (RS) students and teachers were relocated to two 'feeder schools' (FS1 and FS2) in the same neighbourhood. After the completion of the construction and redesign process, the school was reopened in 2013, with many former and new students from the feeder schools moving to the redesign school. As the school was being redesigned, social housing units in the neighbourhood were being demolished and rebuilt as a part of a mixed-income initiative.

> From 2011 to 2012, we held focus groups and interviews with students (ages 4 to 13) and school staff (teachers and administrators).

There were three student focus group age divisions referred to as Primary (Kindergarten to Grade 2), Junior (Grade 3 to Grade 6), and Intermediate (Grade 7 to Grade 8). We asked students and school staff about their experiences transitioning to other schools during the redesign process within the larger context of neighbourhood redevelopment. Based on this research, recommendations for future redesigns as well as implications for practice are discussed.

What we found

CHANGING SOCIAL DYNAMICS

- Upon moving to the feeder schools, students from the redesign school initially felt excited about being at a different school and meeting new people, though some felt scared or nervous. Some students felt happy because they had friends and school staff move with them. Others were sad that some of their friends and school staff moved to different schools. A few students felt that friendships were broken because of their school transition.

- Some students at the feeder schools said that they liked having redesign school students join their school because they had the opportunity to build new friendships. This feeling was not shared by all students, as many said that they did not enjoy having redesign school students in their school and did not get along with them.

- Students from both feeder schools said that they would keep in touch with students who moved schools after the school redesign.

> *"I feel sad because this is my first day at school, and I didn't know the school, I didn't know anybody, but I felt a little bit safe because I knew some of the teachers and people from my old school. So the first few days at lunch, that's who I sat with, because I felt safe with my old friends."* — **Primary Student, RS, 2011**

> *"There was a whole rack of basketballs, the next day… [there was] one ball. They stole them and then they wrote their names on them … I know it's them, because… they crossed [FS] out and put their [RS] name, you can see that they crossed it out.""* — **Junior Student, FS1, 2011**

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- Students and school staff spoke of an initial divide between the students and school staff of the two school groups. Students and teachers reported many cases of bullying, including name calling, spreading rumours, telling secrets, and physical fights. Additionally, the original feeder school students would often blame the newer redesign school students for the lack of school space and the changes in school activities and school resources. However, teachers did note that the divide between the feeder and redesign students eventually lessened.

- Staff members noted that the teachers from the redesign school had strong relationships with their co-workers prior to moving to the feeder schools. Some school staff members felt that there was a division between the staff from the redesign and feeder schools that were brought together during the transition, while others felt that they had merged together well. School staff mentioned it was easier for the teachers to get along than it was for the students.

- Many students from the redesign school felt more comfortable with staff from their own school because they felt that they could trust them more. These students felt that school staff from the feeder school would often become angry with them. They also felt that school staff from the feeder school favoured their original feeder school students.

  > *"S/he is so nice to [FS] kids but when a [RS] kid comes s/he isn't."* — Intermediate Student, FS2, 2012

- One school staff member from the redesign school noted that special needs assistants and educational assistants from the redesign school did not move with the students they had worked with at the redesign school, and suggested that this made it difficult for these students to adjust to their new school environment.

  > *"…should be thinking about how can we work with our kids and with each other to give them the best experience that they possibly can [have]."* — Teacher, FS, 2012

SCHOOL CULTURE/CLIMATE DURING TRANSITION

- Staff recognized that there was difficulty in merging the school cultures at the beginning of the transitional period in 2011, and were working towards having more activities and events to help build relationships between students and families of both the redesign and feeder schools.

- Students and staff said that they had difficulties in learning the new rules and routines of the feeder school, with some students reporting getting into trouble for not following these new rules.

- Many school staff spoke of the importance of strong leadership during the transitional period. School climate and leadership seemed to be deciding factors for some school staff when faced with the option to return to the redesign school or stay at the feeder school.

- Several students said that they missed the redesign school because they were more used to it, identified with the school, and knew more people at that school. Many students were excited to return to the redesign school because they wanted to graduate there, while others were nervous that it would be very different from before the redesign. Those who were not returning to the redesign school after the transitional period felt sad. A few school staff said that feeling a sense of ownership or identifying with the school was particularly important for older students and that resulted in some tension when bringing the redesign school and feeder school groups together.

  > *"If people ask, I always say [that the redesign school] is my school."* — Intermediate Student, RS, 2011

- During the initial transition in 2011, redesign school staff reported feeling rushed when packing materials to move.

- School staff said that the transitional period impacted students' education and experiences at school . They noted that school transitions can be particularly challenging for students with emotional needs and those who are shy.

  > *"The kids in [the neighbourhood] are very resilient, regardless of the construction, things being knocked down, families moving out and back in – they won't say that it's really bothering them, unless you're trying to get that out of them."* — Teacher, RS, 2011

SCHOOL AND NEIGHBOURHOOD TRANSITION

- Because school redesign and neighbourhood redevelopment were occurring at the same time, school staff felt that the combined impact was difficult for students. Students and staff had mixed feelings about the ongoing neighbourhood redevelopment in the community during the transitional period (2011-2012).

  > *"Not only have they changed schools, they have changed houses or apartments or they have seen their best friend go or their neighbour go."* — Teacher, RS, 2012

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Recommendations and implications for practice

- Simultaneous neighbourhood redevelopment and school redesign can be stressful for students and teachers. School staff recognized the importance of having professionals, such as psychologists or social workers, help students and staff members cope with the transition. Establishing a buddy system[1,3,12], having school visits prior to the move[3], and having events only for the new students to the school can help in school related transitions and should be made available. Some of these strategies were employed in the present school redesign.

- Consistent with previous research[1,2,3], students had mixed feelings about transitioning to another school, and reported being excited or nervous. Initially, tension was observed between the two merging school populations at each site, but eventually this decreased.

- School staff felt that more class time and opportunities were needed to help students prepare for the transition. School staff suggested that the school transition and neighbourhood change themes could be woven into the school curriculum to help support students through school- and community-level changes.

- To help to reduce stress related to school transitions, additional prep time should be provided for teachers to prepare for the physical move.

- Some staff members described a need for strong leadership and vision to support school climate during tran-sitional periods. Transitions can be supported through effective leadership from principals who are positive role models, who build relationships with new students and families, and who are open to connecting the school with community agencies[12].

- School staff wanted more opportunities for staff members to come together prior to the transitional period. Research has found that teachers' cohesiveness is associated with improved student and school outcomes[13]. Professional development opportunities focused on transitions or social dynamics may help school staff connect and increase their capacity to support their students during the transition[14].

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