Student and Teacher Perspectives on Safety and Neighbourhood Change

Context and issue

Exposure to violence in the community can have negative effects on children's mental health[1], physical health[2], and academic performance[3]. Moving higher income residents into public housing neighbourhoods with higher rates of violence, known as a mixed-income initiative, can positively affect children's educational achievement[4] and mental health[5]. A key aspect of mixed-income initiatives involves the addition or renovation of housing units and schools to help entice higher income families to move into the neighbourhood[6]. While physically renovated schools can increase students' academic achievement[7], the underlying causes of violence may not necessarily be addressed or resolved by creating new or improved schools[8] or through a mixed-income initiative in general[9,10]. In fact, such neighbourhood redevelopment strategies can even result in the residents' loss of social ties[11,12], which may have implications for residents' feelings of safety.

Our approach

In 2011 and 2012, a public school (RS) located in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhood in downtown Toronto was closed to undergo a school redesign and rebuild. During the school redesign, students and teachers were relocated to two 'feeder schools' (FS1 and FS2) in the same neighbourhood. In 2013, the school (RS) was reopened with many former and new students from the feeder schools moving to the redesign school. In the same year, one of the feeder schools (FS1) was closed. Throughout the school redesign process, a mixed-income initiative that began in 2003 was ongoing in the neighbourhood, whereby old social housing units were being demolished and upgraded.

The present study investigates how students and teachers experience neighbourhood redevelopment and school redesign and what their perspectives are about violence and safety during the process.

> This report is based on focus groups with students (aged 4 to 13), divided into Primary, Junior, and Intermediate grade groupings, and focus groups with teachers in 2013 and 2014.

We sought to understand student and teacher perspectives on school redesign - when construction was completed and the school reopened - as well as their experiences with the ongoing demolition and rebuilding of social housing units as part of neighbourhood redevelopment.

What we found

The findings below reflect participants' perspectives of safety in their school, including during and after school redesign, and in their neighbourhood.

SCHOOL SAFETY

- Because students had to be transferred to neighbouring schools while their school was being redesigned and rebuilt, many reported bullying incidents between the two student populations after the transfer. While some believed that the presence of teachers was helpful in these instances, many believed that more intervention was needed.
- Some students and teachers discussed longstanding issues of territory in the neighbourhood and rivalry between schools, which they believed caused the bullying and physical fights during the school redesign process.
- Many of the older students said that they felt safe in the redesigned school, especially because the school now had alarms, better security cameras, emergency lights, smoke detectors, sprinklers, and places to hide in a lockdown. They also said that there are now fewer fights happening in the outdoor areas of the school because new play equipment had been installed and these areas were more easily monitored by school staff.
- When they first returned to the redesigned school, many of the younger students and teachers reported feeling less protected due to the large windows throughout the school building, which made the inside of the school exposed to the outside neighbourhood. However, teachers noted that the later installment of blinds generally helped to increase feelings of protection, though not in all areas of the school.
- Many teachers found that there were fewer behavioural incidents and that they felt safer due to the new equipment and play areas in the school following the reopening of the redesign school.

"There's just so much fights [at FS2] and some of the people … like the first time I went there, some of the people I knew for a long time… they all looked at me, like, 'Why are you coming here?' and all that, 'Go back to your other school… We don't need you here.' And 'Oh, since the RS kids came here it's all like been so boring, it's not alive anymore.' And that made us feel like, sad." — Junior Student, RS, 2013

"We feel … well, I feel safe because the teachers and the principal always reassure us and tell us that we are safe here and they make us feel safe." — Intermediate Student, RS, 2014

"I feel safe at my house, but I'm so, so safe at the school." — Junior Student, FS2, 2014

"I don't feel safe outside." — Junior Student, FS2, 2014

"Five layers of glass… Glass all over…. in the windows …. Because, like, if there's a bad guy, maybe people could break through." — Junior Student, RS, 2014

"…there is nowhere you could put kids where they wouldn't be seen." — Teacher, RS, 2013

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- For many students, feeling unsafe in school was generally associated with losing friends and social ties due to neighbourhood redevelopment and the relocation of some residents out of the neighbourhood.

NEIGHBOURHOOD CRIME AND SAFETY

- Students and teachers were generally concerned about the level of gang and criminal activities happening throughout the neighbourhood.
- In general, students were not optimistic about neighbourhood redevelopment being able to decrease the incidence of violence and gang-related activities in the neighbourhood.
- Teachers were also aware of the extent of criminal activities and vandalism in the neighbourhood, with some reporting that students' ability to play outside was limited due to potential violence, drug dealing, and gang activity in the neighbourhood.
- Many students believed that moving in new individuals into the neighbourhood could actually result in conflicts between original and new residents, mostly because of differences in social class and the possibility of incoming residents looking down on original residents.
- Some students were concerned about the forced relocation of residents during neighbourhood construction because they believed that it would shift the location of violence to another neighbourhood. Some students were also concerned about the adjustment of those who had to relocate to another neighbourhood during construction because of the stigma of having lived in a marginalized neighbourhood.
- For many students, the overwhelming number of construction sites throughout the neighbourhood and the resultant air pollution and uncleanliness of the neighbourhood were important safety concerns.

"Before there were lots of shootings and then they stopped for a bit, now they are back" — Junior Student, FS2, 2013

"They might be changing the neighbourhood, but they are not going to change the people that are here…" — Junior Student, RS, 2014

"We have circle time [with students] – you can call it whatever you want, but we basically talk about how our weekend went and whatever is on their mind… such as somebody not wanting to leave their apartment because somebody is dealing drugs outside, or they are just not allowed to go outside because there is nothing for them to do there. One of the parks they go to… there is often people with mental health issues and addictive tendencies, so a lot of parents and guardians choose to not let their child have some freedom in that sense." — Teacher, FS2, 2013

"There's going to be more violence happening… You're bringing in people from different neighbourhoods against us. We're not saying that we are harmful to them. They must feel offended by us and try to do something to us that's causing more violence." — Intermediate Student, RS, 2013

Recommendations and implications for practice

- Students' perspectives matter and should be included in neighbourhood policy initiatives that directly affect their lives, including mixed-income and school redesign initiatives.
- Neighbourhood redevelopment and school redesign may create new safety concerns for students and teachers. Installing visible security measures in the school (e.g., security cameras) may help students feel safer. Additionally, our findings support the importance of social ties as they help increase feelings of safety and security among students, especially during times when many changes are happening in the school and in the neighbourhood.
- Feelings of safety in school are also related to the presence of supportive and encouraging teachers and administrators who can provide students with the needed support and attention during times of distress.
- While many students thought of their school as a safe location away from the criminal activities in the neighbourhood, younger students' feelings of safety in school were related to how exposed the inside premises of the school were to outsiders. School redesign initiatives that take place in neighbourhoods with higher rates of violence should consider how students perceive the effectiveness of school doors and windows in keeping students safe from violence in the community.
- Students were unsure if neighbourhood redevelopment helps reduce the stigma attached to living in a particular neighbourhood. Additionally, students noted feeling that meaningful social ties may be difficult to form between long-standing and incoming residents.
- Similar to past research[6,9], students' responses suggest that they questioned whether mixed-income initiatives could reduce violence in their communities as they did not directly resolve the underlying causes of neighbourhood violence.

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