

# Student and staff social dynamics and transitions during school redesign

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates student and school staff perceptions of transitions and changing social dynamics due to a temporary closure of an elementary school undergoing redesign in an inner-city neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 75 students (Kindergarten to Grade 8) and 28 staff who transitioned to two neighbouring schools during the school closure in 2011 and 2012. Students reported changes in their sense of belonging, incidents of bullying and violence, and student–student and student–teacher social dynamics during the transitional period. School staff also reported changing social dynamics among staff and students, the importance of strong leadership and teacher support during transitions and changes to school climate as a result of the transition. Suggestions and recommendations for future transitions associated with school redesign are discussed.

## Keywords

Bullying, school culture, school redesign, school transition, social dynamics, student and teacher perceptions

## Introduction

Transitioning between schools can present challenges for children, as they enter a new social environment with new routines, regulations and expectations, all while forming new relationships with peers, educators and school staff. These challenges include being bullied (Zeedyk et al., 2003), building new relationships (Chan, 2012) and adjusting to a new school social context (Topping, 2011). Such challenges can negatively affect educational achievement (Scherrer, 2013) and result in higher levels of disciplinary measures after transition (Theriot & Dupper, 2010; Topping, 2011).

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Research on school transition has generally focused on transitions between stages of education, such as preschool to Grade 1 (e.g., Carsaro, Molinari, Gold Hadley, & Sugioka, 2003; Chan, 2012) or elementary school to middle/high school (e.g., Hopwood, Hay, & Dymont, 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Topping, 2011). However, students also experience school transitions due to school closure (e.g., Lipman & Haines, 2007), relocation to a new neighbourhood (e.g., Mutch, Rarere, & Stratford, 2011) or the structural redesign of the school-built environment (Comber, 2013). The redesign of the school-built environment often leads to the transition of students to neighbouring schools. As a result, students may face unique challenges not faced by students experiencing other forms of school transition. These differences substantiate the examination of the unique social and psychological processes that result from this form of school transition and the challenges and opportunities created for students and school staff during the transitional period.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of student involvement in school redesign activities (Comber, 2013), student and staff perceptions of school-built environments prior to redesign (Uline, Wolsey, Tschannen-Moran, & Lin, 2010) and the impact of redesign on student academic achievement (Hashim, Strunk, & Marsh, 2018). However, few have specifically investigated student experiences during the transitional periods and even fewer have explored young students' experiences. Thus, there is a need to examine experiences of younger elementary school-aged students during school transitions and the impacts of school redesign and associated school transitions on school social dynamics.

Contributing to the existing research on school transitions, this study focuses on the experiences of students and school staff involved in a transition that is the result of a school closure and redesign. The research helps clarify how transitional periods associated with school redesign can impact school-based social dynamics and highlights important implications for school-level support and practices for students and staff faced with school redesign.

### *This study*

This study examines the various ways through which the closure and redesign of a public school impacts students and school staff temporarily relocating to neighbouring schools. This school, located in a marginalized neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada, was closed down from the summer of 2010 to March 2013 to go through a school redesign and rebuild. During this process, 'redesign school' (RS) students and teachers were relocated to two 'feeder schools' (FS1, FS2) in the same neighbourhood for over 2 years. 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 redesigned school. In addition, the redesign of the school occurred in the context of neighbourhood redevelopment, involving the demolition of the many subsidized housing units in the school catchment area, and the construction of new ones as part of a 'mixed-income' initiative.

This study investigates student and staff perceptions of school transitions and its associated outcomes at the two feeder schools in 2011 and 2012. Two broad research questions guided this study: (1) how do students and school staff perceive transitions (moving from school to school) as a result of school redesign and (2) how do students and school staff perceive social dynamics during the transitional period (while in temporary schools) during a school redesign?

### **Method**

This qualitative case study investigated student and staff perceptions of transitions and changing social dynamics as a result of the temporary closure of an elementary school undergoing school redesign and the resultant transition of students and staff to two neighbouring schools. The study

and its activities were approved by the Research Ethics Board at Ryerson University and the External Research Review Committee of the Toronto District School Board. All data were gathered in the Spring–Summer of 2011 and 2012.

### *Participants*

Focus groups were conducted with a total of 75 students at two elementary school sites at two time points (2011 and 2012). Participating students were 4–13 years old, in Kindergarten to Grade 8. Junior and Senior Kindergarten (JK/SK) students, 4 and 5 year olds, respectively, are part of the public education system in Ontario and elective enrolment is nearly universal. Elementary schools in Ontario typically include Kindergarten to Grade 6 or Kindergarten to Grade 8. At each school site, student participants were divided into focus groups based on grade level. There were three focus group age divisions referred to as Primary (JK/SK to Grade 2; PFG), Junior (Grade 3 to Grade 6; JFG) and Intermediate (Grade 7 to Grade 8; IFG).

Focus groups and interviews were also conducted with 28 school staff, including teachers and administration, at the two school sites. In 2012, 19 teachers participated in focus groups at the two school sites. In addition, four administrative staff participated in interviews in 2011 and five administrative staff participated in 2012.

### *School sites*

This study included two elementary schools, located in an inner-city Toronto neighbourhood that has a high concentration of poverty, drug use, violence and deteriorating housing buildings. In 2011, the ethno-culturally diverse neighbourhood was home to many children and families, where children and youth made up about 40% of the population and approximately half of the residents were in low-income households (City of Toronto, 2014). The neighbourhood includes Canada's largest and oldest public housing complex, which has been undergoing redevelopment for over a decade. Redevelopment involves the staged demolition and construction of new public housing as well as new private sector housing to create a mixed, denser community, with through streets replacing mid-20th-century 'garden city' layout. The public housing residents, who have the right of return, are relocated in phased waves to other buildings within the neighbourhood, nearby, or to other areas of the city (Johnson, 2010).

In this neighbourhood, the RS was slated to undergo school redesign and renovations beginning in September 2010. During the school redesign, which included changes to the built environment and the addition of an attached community centre, students and staff were moved to two neighbouring schools. RS students from Kindergarten to Grade 5 moved to FS1, a Kindergarten to Grade 6 school. RS students in Grade 6 to Grade 8 moved to FS2, a Kindergarten to Grade 8 school. Some RS staff moved to FS1; others moved to FS2. RS students and staff remained at FS1 and FS2 until March of 2013. At this time, FS2 was closed and students went either to FS1 or to the RS. Teachers also dispersed similarly, with some going to work in other schools. Data were collected at FS1 and FS2 in 2011 and 2012, during the 'transitional period' (when RS students and staff attended FS1 and FS2).

### *Data collection and analysis*

All data in this study were gathered through focus groups and interviews carried out at FS1 and FS2 in 2011 and 2012. A semi-structured focus group and interview method was selected because it allows facilitators to have a predetermined focus, while allowing participants to freely draw on

personal and shared experiences. This allowed for rich discussion between participants, building on one another's comments (Franz, 2011; Kvale, 2008). With a predetermined set of initial questions, a facilitator and a research assistant were present in all focus groups. The facilitator asked questions and, if needed, clarified the meaning of the questions being asked and prompted participants to engage in the discussion. All questions were phrased in a developmentally appropriate manner with age-appropriate questioning, particularly for the PFG. The research assistant observed participants, noting non-verbal cues. Students, teachers, and administrative staff were asked questions about their general feelings about the school, their thoughts about school redesign, and their experiences of relocation to a new school.

Research team members reviewed verbatim transcriptions of audio recordings from focus groups and used inductive thematic analysis, informed by a grounded theory method (Birks & Mills, 2011), to categorize segments of student and school staff responses regarding the transition of students and staff to neighbouring schools within the context of school redesign. After preliminary inter-rater coding and discussing discrepancies as they arose during meetings of the research assistants and primary investigator, a coding guide for analysis of data was finalized, and data were coded thematically in NVivo 10.

## Findings and discussion

Students, teachers, and school board staff were invited to share their perspectives on transitions and social dynamics while relocated in FS1 and FS2. The following section summarizes and discusses the main findings. See Table 1 for additional student and school staff quotes.

### *Feelings about moving to FS1 and FS2*

In both 2011 and 2012, RS students at FS1 and FS2 were asked to retrospectively share their initial feelings about moving schools and experiences in the new school environment. Upon moving to the feeder schools, some RS students at FS1 and FS2 reported initially feeling excited about being at a different school and meeting new people, while others reported being scared, shy, and nervous. Students described missing the RS and the students and staff who had moved to a different school. Some students reported that when first arriving at the feeder schools, they felt happy to reunite with friends and teachers who had moved to the same school. One student noted:

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. (PFG, FS1, 2011)

Consistent with previous studies on transitions to new schools (Carsaro et al., 2003; Topping, 2011), students in this study referred to finding comfort in having other RS students and staff at their new school, which contributed to a sense of support and safety during the transition. Creating a sense of support and belonging in the school can be important to help students transition into a new school and reduce incidences of bullying (Crouch, Keys, & McMahon, 2014; Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Thornber, 2015). Pellegrini and Long (2002) suggest that the initial increase in bullying after transition and its decrease over time could be due to students' desire to successfully navigate a new social environment and establish dominance early in the transitional period. Other research suggests that transitions can act as an opportunity to experience a change in their social landscape and depart from established social roles or hierarchies and develop a new sense of identity (Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011). Farmer et al. (2015) found that bullies who end friendships with other bullies during

**Table 1.** Student and school staff quotes organized by theme.

Theme	Quotes
<p>Feelings about moving to FS1 and FS2  <i>Students had mixed feelings about moving to the feeder schools. While some students were excited for the move, others felt nervous about moving schools and sad to leave the redesign school (RS).</i></p>	<p>'I miss [RS] and the people that used to go there'. (JFG, FS1, 2011)                      'I miss the [school] office. I was there like every day. It was nice to see friends there'. (JFG, FS1, 2011)                      'I think I just felt like when I first came here, [to FS1], I was really nervous'. (JFG, FS1, 2012)                      'I felt nervous because I didn't know much people [here at FS2], and I felt a little shy and happy because I got to know new teachers and I go to see my teacher who was working at [RS]'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)                      'I guess I was so excited in a way. More drama, more friends to meet, more people'. (JFG, FS1, 2012)                      'When I came to this school [FS2] I was kind of nervous, but when I found out my friends were here, I was happy, and I also had some friends here. I also found out I had a teacher from [RS]'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)                      'It's kind of a good thing [to have RS students at our school]; it's kind of a bad thing. It's good because we get to meet more new people, and it's bad because there are all these fights and issues, and it's kind of annoying with all these people now'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)                      'I like that [RS] people are here because we have lots of people to make friends with'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)                      'I like this school because I can make friends, I just meet friends, we start hanging out with each other, and you know, we start talking with each other, and becoming friends'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)                      'I just said, "Oh what's your name," and I said, "Do want to be friends?" and they said, "Oh sure," and then I just sat with them'. (PFG, FS2, 2011)                      Researcher: 'Are you friends with some of these [RS] students?'                      Student: 'No one! They're making fun of our school name'. (PFG, FS2, 2011)                      'I felt more comfortable with [RS teachers] and trusted them'. (JFG, FS1, 2012)                      'One of the [school staff] is so nice to the [FS1] kids but so rude to the [RS] kids'. (JFG, FS1, 2012)                      Student: 'Our teacher that's in our class, she is going to'. [FS1]                      Researcher: 'Okay and how does that make you feel?'                      Student: 'Sad. She is a nice teacher'. (PFG, FS2, 2012)</p>
<p>Student-student social dynamics during transition  <i>Student and school staff (SS) perceptions of student social dynamics were mixed. Participants reported a division between feeder school and RS students at both FS1 and FS2 during the transitional period, but also noted that this division dissipated over time.</i></p>	<p>'It has been less problematic in melding the staff than with the kids'. (SS, 2011)                      'With the additional staff it has been excellent. They are phenomenal – they enjoy being here. They have really stepped up in terms of being involved in the school and also being leaders to our more reluctant teachers'. (SS, 2011)                      'I think initially there had been this sort of culture of [FS2] was its own entity and [RS]. They are very close, [but] there wasn't a lot of collaboration'. (SS, 2012)</p>
<p>School staff-student social dynamics and relationships  <i>Students from RS felt most comfortable with former RS teachers in the feeder school. Moving RS teachers with students was important in supporting students during the transition. Teacher-student social dynamics and teaching culture                      While some school staff felt that merging feeder school and RS school staff was challenging, others felt the transition had a positive influence on teaching culture.</i></p>	<p>Researcher: 'Okay and how does that make you feel?'                      Student: 'Sad. She is a nice teacher'. (PFG, FS2, 2012)                      'It has been less problematic in melding the staff than with the kids'. (SS, 2011)                      'With the additional staff it has been excellent. They are phenomenal – they enjoy being here. They have really stepped up in terms of being involved in the school and also being leaders to our more reluctant teachers'. (SS, 2011)                      'I think initially there had been this sort of culture of [FS2] was its own entity and [RS]. They are very close, [but] there wasn't a lot of collaboration'. (SS, 2012)</p>

Table 1. (Continued)

Theme	Quotes
<p>Student behaviour and bullying  <i>Students and school staff reported increases in bullying, aggressive behaviour and fighting during the transitional period. These behaviours were often discussed in relation to the social division between feeder school and RS students.</i></p>	<p>'Students from [RS] are bragging about the renovations that they're making on their school'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)          'Over here, there are some kids, the grade 3s, were spreading rumours about me, saying that I only have one friend – they were mean to me and made me cry'. (JFG, FS2, 2011)          'Sometimes, they [FS1 students] talk to you, and it's really rude. When they get into trouble, they think that because they've been here, the office will trust them'. (JFG, FS1, 2011)          'Within [this community], there is a strong identity of the school that you went to. When mixing students up, there are some getting used to moments'. (SS, 2011)          'I wanted to graduate at [RS]. I wish that I could and my picture would be on that wall because I've been there since kindergarten'. (JFG, FS1, 2011)</p>
<p>Student place identity and sense of belonging  <i>RS students maintained their sense of belonging and place identity with RS during the transitional period.</i></p>	<p>'I like the old school better because I'm used to it'. (JFG, FS1, 2011)          'At [RS], I knew everyone in the area'. (JFG, FS1, 2011)          'The students feel like they are part of the school and regardless of whether they [are] going to FS1 or RS they all feel very close to each other. That's the impression I have with them anyway. I think it was helpful because the [RS] staff came and the kids didn't feel as much of a loss'. (SS, 2012)          'The kids who can cope will have great resiliency, the kids who can't won't. And it's [on] an individual basis...'. (SS, 2011)</p>
<p>Student resiliency  <i>Some school staff spoke of students' varying abilities to cope with change, while others noted that the students from this community are particularly resilient.</i></p>	<p>'Kids are probably the most resilient in the world. You can change the environment completely, but it will affect the adults more than it will affect the kids. Particularly the kids in [this community] 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'. (SS, 2011)          'At the end of the year, last year, we did a lot of things to get ready for the change. We did a whole school production about change, art and dance in order to build resiliency. It was a focused effort'. (SS, 2011)</p>
<p>Supports for students and staff during transition  <i>To support students and staff during the transition, schools connected prior to the transition, with joint school staff socials and events for students to meet, and school staff worked to create open communication with families.</i></p>	<p>'Teachers were able to meet together before, [they] met at a pub in a social setting. So that the first time they were meeting wasn't academic'. (SS, 2011)          'Other classes set up pen-pal arrangements. We set up assemblies and other events for the children to get to know each other and connect... We did a joint parent council for parents to get familiar. We did a community event in the evening. We provided hot dogs and there [were a] few activities for the kids, and the families from [FS1] and [RS] were invited'. (SS, 2011)</p>

transitional periods often end their bullying behaviour in the new school setting, while bullies who sustain friendships with other bullies will likely remain bullies in the new school.

Bullying is a highly rated concern for students moving into secondary schools (Zeedyk et al., 2003); however, RS students in this study did not report being worried about bullies in the feeder schools. These differences could be attributed to the nature of the transition itself as well as the age of the students during transition; students in this study were moving from one elementary school to another elementary school, rather than from an elementary school to a secondary school.

### *Student–student social dynamics during transition*

When asked about changes in peer relationships during the transitional period, some RS and FS students said that they had built new friendships, while others said that they maintained previous friendships. Some RS students said that their old relationships changed or were broken while attending the feeder schools. Some FS1 and FS2 students said that they liked having RS 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 either like or get along with RS students in their school.

Transitioning to a new school can also provide students with an opportunity to experience a new social landscape, allowing them to shed old social ties or roles and create new ones (Farmer et al., 2011). For students in this case study who enjoyed the transitional period and created new bonds and friendships, the transitional period may have provided an opportunity to move away from their established social roles, develop a new sense of identity and create new friendships.

More specific to the unique context of this study where two school student bodies were merged, students also reported a division between RS and FS students at the beginning of the transitional period. Although the majority of comments regarding divisions between school groups were made by IFG students, a few comments were also made by PFG and JFG students, suggesting that the division, to some degree, was felt by all grade levels. One FS2 student said that when RS students arrived, they felt that “[FS2 students] all have to stick together” (IFG, FS2, 2011). School ownership and school pride seemed to play a role in creating the division between the two groups, particularly among the intermediate students. RS students reported feeling “safe” and comfortable with students and teachers from their previous school when first attending the FS1 and FS2, which may have strengthened the bonds between RS students and even created an “us vs. them” attitude. One IFG student described this divide as a “humungous feud between which school is better and which kids are better” (IFG, FS2, 2012). Strategies specifically targeted at older students may be required during transitional periods, as previous research considering junior and intermediate students shows peer relationships to be particularly important to this age group as they transition between schools (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Martínez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak, & Nellis, 2010; Topping, 2011).

Students reported that this initial division between the RS and FS students dissipated after some time. One FS2 student said that although initially the school groups were separate, it now feels “like they are one of us” (IFG, 2012). Student voices on the division of school groups were echoed in the school staff. Some school staff members also noted that initially there was a split between school groups, but that this split disappeared over time. Some staff said that they did not know if there was a division between students, some did not mention a division at all, suggesting that not all staff members were attuned to the divisions in peer relationships.

Although these social divisions may dissipate over time, intervention measures prior to the transition and extra supports at the beginning of the transition may be needed to help the two groups merge easier. Professional development programmes can encourage teachers to be aware of the social dynamics between students, helping to increase student sense of belonging (Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, & Murray, 2010), especially during transitional periods.

### *School staff–student social dynamics and relationships*

RS students said that they felt more comfortable with staff from their own school in comparison with staff from the FS because they felt that they could trust them more. For instance, one student said, “I have known the teachers longer from [RS] so I feel more comfortable with [approaching them] with problems and school work” (IFG, FS2, 2012). Staff members recognized the difference in comfort levels between groups of students and teachers, and felt that students associated RS teachers with their old school. RS students felt that the FS staff exhibited favouritism towards FS students. Some students expressed feelings of loss when their teachers changed schools, and some said they would miss the teachers who would not be working at the RS after redesign.

Social support from school staff members during the transitional period was important for both students and staff. Some school staff members were intentionally relocated with students to FS1 and FS2, which proved to be an effective practice in the case of this transition. One school staff member noted that many of the Special Needs Assistants and Educational Assistants did not move with the children they had worked with and suggested that this made it particularly difficult for students with disabilities to adjust to the new school environment. As our results suggest, teachers who are viewed by students as supportive and caring can help children experience the transitions more positively, and this may be particularly important for children with disabilities.

### *Teacher–teacher social dynamics and teaching culture*

Like student social dynamics, school staff social dynamics changed during the transitional period. Teacher experiences in this study highlight the uniqueness of school redesigns, as teachers experience transitions alongside students, and have the similar task of merging into a new school environment. While staff from the RS had strong relationships with each other prior to moving to the FS, some school staff sensed a division between RS and FS staff groups during the transition, while others felt that the groups merged well. Although there may have been some tension, one staff member said that it was easier to blend the teachers than the students.

Some staff said that the two schools had different teaching cultures prior to the transitional period and that merging two teaching cultures was difficult. One staff member said that the “tension between the two [groups of teachers] . . . [led to] a strained relationship” (School Staff (SS), 2011). However, many felt that overall the transition had a positive effect on the teaching culture, with one staff member saying it allowed teachers to learn from each other and share practices, skills and strengths. This individual noted that the merge was,

. . . challenging, but not in a negative way. It was [a] learning [experience] to harmoniously work together with different types of views and . . . set a new view so that we . . . make this transition a little bit easier for everybody. (SS, 2012)

Furthermore, all groups of teachers shared the belief that the wellbeing of the students should be at the centre of their practices and teaching culture, with one individual saying that teachers “should be thinking about how [we can] work with our kids and with each other to give them the best experience that they possibly can [have]” (SS, 2012).

Staff members discussed differences between the two merging schools in disciplinary style, level of engagement with the community, expectations for student behaviour and responsibility, and philosophy of administration. One individual noted that RS staff members “wanted to impart [RS] ways” on the FS1, but that FS1 staff members “wanted to continue doing business as usual” (SS, 2011). Many referred to feeling that they had to “redevelop” a school culture together from

“ground zero”. Staff members acknowledge that it was difficult for staff and students to learn the new rules and routines. The challenges with cohesiveness felt among staff were reflected in student voices, where RS students felt that they were treated differently or disciplined more by FS teachers. Without a sense of cohesiveness among staff, disciplinary practices may have been inconsistent across the school. Teacher cohesiveness can be particularly important during transitional periods to support students and this has been found to be associated with improved student and school outcomes (Brown & Medway, 2007).

Leadership may be important to ensure that staff are supported throughout transitions and to help maintain a positive school culture, which may be particularly at risk in schools with transitions (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2016). Several staff members highlighted the need for strong, supportive leaders during periods of uncertainty to help teachers feel empowered and thereby maintain high student achievement and wellbeing. Previous research has shown that teacher empowerment is known to be influenced by collegial and supportive leadership and may affect students’ academic performance (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000).

### *Student behaviour and bullying*

Although RS students did not report being bullied as an initial concern when first arriving at the feeder schools, all groups of students reported that bullying did occur during the transitional period. RS, FS1 and FS2 students in all three groups reported name calling, the spreading of rumours and telling of secrets, and physical fights. The bullying described by students was generally related to the social division between RS and FS students. For example, students spoke of how RS students stole gym equipment and changed the school name written on it:

- Student: Friday, there was a whole rack of balls. Monday [there was] one ball.  
 Student: They stole them and then they wrote their names on them.  
 Researcher: How do you know it’s them?  
 Student: I know it’s them, because . . . they crossed [FS1] out and put their [RS] name, you can see that they crossed it out (JFG, FS1, 2011).

A few intermediate students from FS2 felt that the increase in violence was due to the increased school population. One student said, “This year there has been a lot of fights in our school. Sometimes . . . you feel like you are going to be the next target” (JFG, FS1, 2012). Staff members also reported increases in aggressive behaviour, bullying and fighting during the transitional period.

Increases in bully behaviour, victimization, and behaviours leading to discipline, such as fighting, have been found to increase after school transitions (Lester, Mander, & Cross, 2015; Theriot & Dupper, 2010; Topping, 2011), as is reflected in this study. Students in this study were experiencing a dramatic shift in their school social landscape during the transitional period. Social interactions in the school and classroom have been found to be related to delinquent behaviour, where social supportive school environments relate to lower levels of violence (Spratt, 2004). The dramatic changes in social structure and relationships experienced by students in this study could have led to the noted increase of violent behaviour.

### *Student place identity and sense of belonging*

FS1 and FS2 students often blamed RS students for lack of space, resources, activities, and for the loss of FS teachers who either moved to the other FS or a school in a different neighbourhood. In 2011, the transitional period coincidentally overlapped with teacher job action where teachers were

not leading extracurricular activities, so many of the missing or lacking programmes identified by FS students may have actually been related to the teacher strike. One school staff member acknowledged that FS students tended to “blame [RS students] for when things go wrong” (SS, 2011). RS students explained that it was difficult coming to the feeder schools because they had different rules and routines and felt that they often “got in trouble” because they did not follow the new rules.

Staff members and students referred to the relationship between school ownership, perceptions of the school, and in general, how students relate to the physical features of the school environment. One staff member said that it is important to make the school space “feel like it’s [the students’] or otherwise [the students] are going to vandalise it. So unless [students] have ownership of this building, they are going to trash it” (SS, 2012). A few school staff members noted that school ownership was particularly important for older students, which caused some tension when merging RS and FS groups. Although the schools in this study are geographically close and part of the same larger community, school identity was important to students. One school staff member said, “Within [this community], there is a strong identity of the school that you went to” (SS, 2011). An RS student explained, “If people ask [what my school is], I always say [the Redesign School] is my school” (IFG, FS2, 2011). Many students were excited to return to the RS because they wanted to graduate from the school where they started Kindergarten, while others were sad that they would not graduate from the RS because they would not be returning. Although RS students had been at the feeder schools for 2 years, students still felt a strong connection to the RS and wanted to graduate with its name.

These results illustrate the importance of considering how individual-level factors such as age and place identity as well as larger school-level factors such as teacher strikes, can influence how students cope with and respond to school transition. Past research has shown that during transition, school social climate and student sense of belonging impact student success and wellbeing and may influence behaviour and academic success (Cueto, Guerrero, Sugimaru, & Zevallos, 2009). A positive sense of belonging is related to student feelings of acceptance, positive peer relationship and feelings of safety in the school (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Ensuring students feel supported and cared for can impact students’ perceptions of their relationship with teachers, and therefore positively impact overall student sense of belonging (Crouch et al., 2014).

### *Student resiliency*

School staff members recognized that students’ individual characteristics are predictive of how well they adjust during transition, specifically noting that the process is more challenging for students who have emotional needs or who are more reserved or shy. One school staff member noted that students vary in levels of resiliency in light of change and transitions. Another individual said that students, particularly from this community, are extremely resilient, even more so than adults.

It is also possible that the transitional period helped build resiliency in students. When asked about what it will be like to return to the RS after the redesign is complete, while many students had mixed perspectives, one student said, “It’s probably just going to change a lot but we’ll get used to it like we got used to it here [at FS2]” (IFG, FS2, 2012). Experiencing the first move may have helped students recognize that change involves an adjustment period, but eventually friendships and support systems can be rebuilt.

### *Supports for students and staff during transition*

Staff members discussed different forms of support provided to students, staff and families, such as efforts to build connections between students and staff at the two merging schools prior to the transition through activities such as student pen-pal programmes and social nights for teachers.

Prior to the transition, a committee including RS, FS1 and FS2 staff members met once a month to prepare for the move and resiliency training was provided for staff.

Staff members spoke about their efforts in supporting families throughout the transition. Schools initially told families that “we are going to try to provide the easiest transition for you as possible” (SS, 2011) and that they would try to keep siblings together during the transitions. Long-term plans for the RS were shared with families, students and staff members in the hopes that the excitement about the RS becoming an “incredible community school” would help during the transition. Maintaining strong communications and relationships with school staff is important in supporting families experiencing school-based transitions (Chan, 2012; Mutch et al., 2011; Topping, 2011). Although school staff members discussed how information about the school redesign process was shared with families at the beginning of the transition, they did not refer to how communications and relationships were maintained throughout the transition.

Some staff members had students participate in class art projects tied to their experiences of transition to help them express their feelings about the change at the school and neighbourhood levels. Examples include student projects displaying an artistic timeline of school redesign and neighbourhood redevelopment, drawings of the favourite things in students’ neighbourhood and a three-dimensional (3D) model of the neighbourhood made by students. Comber (2013) investigated the use of place-based pedagogy during times of change in a school where elementary school teachers developed a book of memories with their students who were experiencing neighbourhood change to engage in collective meaning making and better understand the changes happening in their school and community. School staff in this study desired more flexibility in the curriculum so that more class time could be spent on topics of transitions and change. Flexibility in the curriculum may be important during transitional times for students, as classrooms can be used as spaces to help students navigate the changes happening around them.

In preparing for the transition, school staff in this study spoke about the need for more prep time and more opportunities for school staff from each school to connect prior to the transition. Similarly, after interviewing 12 primary and secondary teachers regarding the key elements of successful transitions, Hopwood et al. (2016) found that teachers reported communication between school staff prior to transitions and increased teacher supports, including increased planning time, are important factors to ensure students successfully transition schools.

In this study, school staff identified strong leadership, having school administrative leaders move with staff and hiring extra staff members to assist with packing, as positive forms of support. Adequate supports for teachers and strong leadership seem to be important factors in successful transitions. Similarly, research has indicated that more professional development opportunities and additional staff supports in the classroom are important features of successful transitions (Hopwood et al., 2016). Once faced with the decision to return to the RS, some school staff explained that school climate and leadership would be a deciding factor. For instance, principals may have a role in supporting teachers to effectively address bullying incidents by building teacher capacity in managing bullying behaviours (Li, Chen, Chen, & Chen, 2017). Strong leadership is important during times of change in schools (Green, 2018) and can impact teacher retention (Player, Youngs, Perrone, & Grogan, 2017). According to Green (2018), principals can be important school–community liaisons and leaders in creating a school culture that supports students during times of change.

## Conclusion

This study afforded a unique opportunity to hear student and staff perspectives on social dynamics and transitions tied to the redesign of a local inner-city school. Lessons learned based on successful

board, school and educator practices in this case study are described below, as well as suggestions by students and staff as being useful for future practice:

- Neighbourhood redevelopment and school redesign occurring simultaneously can be stressful for students and teachers. In this study, school staff wanted more professionals to help students and staff members cope with the transition, such as psychologists or social workers. Research has suggested that establishing a buddy system, having school visits prior to the move, and having events which only include the new students to the school can help in school-related transitions (Mutch et al., 2011; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Rodriguez, Cumming, & Strnadová, 2017; Topping, 2011; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Some of these strategies were employed in the present school redesign.
- Prior to transitions, curriculum goals and relevancy to students' lived experiences should be considered. School staff explained that there should be more flexibility in the curriculum during transitional periods. Projects that focus on neighbourhood and school change can help students make meaning of what is happening (Comber, 2013; Green, 2018). School staff felt that more class time and opportunities were needed to help students prepare for the transition and 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 change.
- Previous research has suggested activities prior to transitions that encourage social connections between students and staff can help ease transitions (Hopwood et al., 2016; Topping, 2011; Zeedyk et al., 2003). It may be beneficial to be flexible in regards to the start date of school and perhaps include "camp-type programs coming in at the beginning or the end" of the transition to provide students and teachers with more time to adjust to changes, get settled and encourage students to build relationships with one another. To support student social dynamics and teacher stress levels, the timing of moving students and school staff should be considered prior to transitions, and appropriate prep time is needed for teachers to prepare for the physical move.
- School staff in this study 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 (Brown & Medway, 2007). 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 (Hamm et al., 2010; Hopwood et al., 2016).
- Some staff members described a need for strong leadership and vision during the school transitions. Transitions can be supported through principals who are positive role models for staff, who make efforts to build relationships with new students and their families, and are open to connecting the school with community agencies (Green, 2018; Mutch et al., 2011).

While the findings of this study are contextualized by the unique simultaneous redevelopment of a neighbourhood and a school redesign, they help in understanding the challenges that can emerge from school redesign interventions and associated school transitions. This research is important from an equity perspective since school transitions can be particularly challenging for students who are marginalized (e.g., Espinoza & Juvonen, 2011; Fortuna, 2014; Theriot & Dupper, 2010). More research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of school transition as a result of school redesign, including its impact on students and school staff after returning to the redesigned school. As well, additional research is needed with a focus on families to determine how these transitions may affect them and how they may be supported.

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