

One More Broken Window: *the impact of neighbourhood decline on schools*

RESEARCH AIMS

Research by Perpetuity Research Ltd for the NASUWT explores the impact of the physical environment on behaviour and attitudes within schools.

Drawing on theories developed through environmental criminology,¹ the research examines the experience of schools located in areas characterised by physical blight and deprivation.

Questions examined in the study include:

- *How does the physical environment outside the school gates impact on the educational experiences of young people?*
- *Do schools have a role in local area regeneration?*
- *How effectively are schools involved in neighbourhood renewal activity?*

Methodology

The research employed a mix of evidence collection strategies, including interviews with schools, young people and other stakeholders, together with first-hand observations and case studies. The research team also undertook a Crime Opportunity Profile (COP) in each case study area in order to investigate the nature and extent of crime and antisocial behaviour, fear of crime generators and the impact of environmental design on perceptions and behaviours within schools.

Issues

The direction of travel of current education policy confirms schools as being at the heart of local communities, with a key role to play in transforming the lives of children, young people and families.

However, whilst schools have an important contribution to make, there is also evidence that points to factors beyond the school – in

particular, poverty and social class – as key determinants of the educational outcomes achieved by children and young people.

The relationship between poverty and attainment is well documented, but there has been relatively little research examination in the UK of the relationship between the physical contexts in which schools are situated and the educational experiences of young people. This is despite the major financial investment that has taken place over the last decade to rebuild and refurbish school buildings.

If the quality of the learning environment within schools can be said to affect pupils' learning, what, if any, impact might the quality of the environment beyond the school gates also have and how are these wider issues being addressed?

How do pupils and teachers respond where schools are sited in physically impoverished areas?

¹ See Professor George Kelling, quoted in *Urban Environment Today*, 26 June 1997. See also *Report of the Working Party on the Fear of Crime (The Grade Report)*, published by the Home Office 1989.

Main Findings and Conclusions

The quality of the physical environment affects individual behaviour and behaviour within and in relation to schools.

Where local physical environments are allowed to become dirty, litter strewn and covered in graffiti, this is likely to give rise to the perception that: *"No one else really cares about this area, so why should I?"* or *"That's a really run-down area; I wouldn't want to go there"*.

Fear avoidance is a main response to poor physical environments, leading to spiralling decline. The more an area is avoided, the greater becomes the perception of danger and the more the area is avoided. Eventually the perception of danger becomes reality. This can lead to the establishment of 'no go' areas.

Schools are affected adversely by being located within declining physical neighbourhoods.

Poor quality physical neighbourhoods are likely to impact on the way that individual schools are perceived, the willingness of parents to choose to send their children to these schools, the ability of schools to recruit and retain high quality staff, and the motivations and outcomes of pupils who attend these schools. In short, an association is established between the unpleasant characteristics of the locality and the school in the area, leading to school avoidance.

There is evidence to suggest that factors in the physical environment external to the school can impact upon schools, affecting behaviour, attendance, academic achievement and maintaining parental support. Investigating the impact of the external environment is a critical element in explaining pupil behaviour.

The establishment of extended schools and the statutory duties on schools to promote community cohesion and ensure pupil wellbeing raise issues about how and to what extent schools should be involved in and consulted about wider community safety agendas.

Public policy should address the educational impact of the physical environment in local neighbourhoods by locating schools within strategic plans for local neighbourhood regeneration, community safety and environmental renewal.

The role of schools in the regeneration agenda needs to be carefully considered without adding to the existing burdens of school leadership teams.

Community safety policies can contribute to helping to improve the behaviour of pupils within schools; however, schools are not sufficiently involved in or consulted about the development of these policies.

Crime and fear of crime data relating to the areas served by individual schools should be readily available for use by schools to enable better joined-up planning.

Schools should be encouraged to share with other local stakeholders data that contributes to building a picture about the needs of the local community, including data relating to pupil attendance, achievement and behaviour. Critical incident data relating to individual schools is essential in order to enable schools and other bodies to understand and respond to problems.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full research report is available from the NASUWT or can be downloaded at www.teachersunion.org.uk.

NASUWT-COMMISSIONED RESEARCH

The NASUWT programme of commissioned research involves independent researchers engaged in leading edge research and development activity throughout the UK.

The NASUWT is committed to publishing the results of all research it commissions in order to inform the development of policy and research scholarship, and to contribute to public and professional debate. All of the Union's commissioned research contributes directly to improving teachers' practice, working lives and outcomes for children and young people.

NASUWT
The Teachers' Union

Hillscourt Education Centre, Rose Hill, Rednal, Birmingham B45 8RS
Tel: 0121 453 6150 Fax: 0121 457 6208 E-mail: nasuwt@mail.nasuwt.org.uk
Website: www.teachersunion.org.uk

The largest teachers' union in the UK