

Running Head: ELIMINATION OF RECESS IN SCHOOLS

Is the elimination of recess in school a violation of a child's basic human rights?

(A Content Analysis)

Alicia M. Dubroc

American Intercontinental University

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Abstract

The elimination of recess in schools across the country is becoming a normal occurrence in many communities, large and small. In each study presented in this content analysis, we find that free time and unstructured play is indeed essential to a child's healthy cognitive development.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, from the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights guarantees our children the right to play and the right to take breaks, very similar to how the United States Department of Labor ensures workers in this country the right to have breaks in the work day. For school age children, breaks are essential to not only healthy cognitive development, but to help reduce or eliminate stress and the promotion of a sedentary lifestyle, which can lead to depression, obesity, suicide or overall poor mental health.

Is the elimination of recess in school a violation of a child's basic human rights?

According to the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, forty percent of schools in the United States are eliminating, reducing or changing recess periods. This study proposes that the elimination of recess in a school setting is indeed a violation of a child's rights in regard to rest and leisure time due to them in the course of day. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, from the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights declares that, "1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts," and "2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity." (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) The U.S. Department of Labor has set forth regulations regarding meal and rest periods for adult workers, which by comparison seem very generous compared to breaks in the average American student's day. In the Code of Federal Regulations Pertaining to U.S. Department of Labor, Title 29, Chapter 5, we see that "Rest periods of short duration, running from 5 minutes to about 20 minutes, are common in industry. They promote the efficiency of the employee..." (U.S. Dept of Labor, 2007) Children in schools across America today very often do not even get a full 30 minute break for lunch time like most working adults receive in the same country. Gone are the crowds of laughing, running, playing children from playgrounds in schools all across our country. In their place, are stressed out, overworked, more often overweight, more socially challenged and unmotivated, uninterested students that are in much need of a little break time that they certainly have due every day. This content analysis will show the results of studies that support these statements on a variety of

levels. While many schools and administrations feel pressure to raise test scores and academic achievement levels, recess seems to be an easy cut from a student's day. According to the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting, some schools have even eliminated recess for fear of liability suits. Many studies prove that children and adults alike need a break from any one process after set periods of time.

“Recess is the right of every child.”

(National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2007)

Review of Literature

Eleven studies were included in this Content Analysis. An assortment of venues were searched in order to locate and evaluate these reports, such as the internet, educational databases online, including the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), the electronic library of American InterContinental University and a small-town public library, which led to an educational database for the state of Tennessee. An assortment of web-based resources was also used, including articles published on the web, in journals and in educational newsletters that were available in electronic format.

The first study we explore is a position paper, titled *Recess and the Importance of Play. A Position Statement on Young Children and Recess* that declares the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education deems recess as “an essential component of education and that preschool and elementary school children must have the opportunity to participate in regular periods of active, free play with peers.” (NAECS/SDE, 2001) This position paper, *Recess and the Importance of Play A Position Statement on Young Children and Recess*, defines recess as a set time during a school day to allow free, unstructured play time for students. This is a report that shows there are great benefits to allowing recess in a school day.

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) is a national organization focused on improving curriculum, methods of instructions, and the betterment of program administrations. A study by Skrupskelis in 2000 is quoted in this paper. In regard to recess being eliminated, Skrupskelis reported “This disturbing phenomenon has no serious research to back it up, and is actually counterproductive to increasing the academic achievements of students. (NAECS/SDE, 2001)

Some of the benefits of recess to students are reported by the NAECS/SDE. One benefit of the break time is the release of pent up energy, which allows the children to come back into a classroom refreshed, or with a renewed energy to learn with an open mind, less inhibited by physical frustration or boredom. Recess is not only beneficial to a child's physical development, but to his social, emotional and cognitive development as well. Recess gives kids a chance to use skills that will help them to become productive, healthy members of society. Social development is honed by proper peer interaction during recess breaks. We will see this statement in a number of the other studies as well.

The lack of structure during a typical recess allows children to socialize in ways that they would not be able to do otherwise. This lack of structure allows the children to have choices. Choices about social play leads to healthy cognitive development. Emotional development helps children to relate to the world in a "normal" way. Students that are allowed interaction with their peers in a "free" environment are allowed the ability to create and sustain human relationships, for better or worse. Even the formation of bad relationships on the playground can help a child to grow in a positive direction. Physical activity, aside from being necessary, has been proven to be beneficial to social and emotional development. Allowing children to run and play uninhibited by tight arrangement of rules allows the body to get essential exercise, which has commonly known benefits to a human body, including the reduction of stress-levels. Stress can lead to depression, obesity, suicide and so many other damaging conditions, this is common knowledge. Since a simple recess break can help alleviate this risk for children in our school systems, then the reinstatement of recess should at least be discussed and considered.

NAECS/SDE suggests that educators, parents and policy makers support efforts that maintain recess as part of a child's day. They also promote the effort to recognize the

importance of recess and of healthy, physical free-play in the developmental role of young children. Supporting research and professional development that helps educators to understand the development cycles of a child is imperative to ensure healthy break times in schools remains a constant. (NAECS/SDE, 2001)

While some school systems, such as the Michigan State Board of Education, recognize that “a child’s intellectual growth cannot take place without having met his basic physical needs,” many others do not. (State of Michigan, 2001) The Michigan State Board of Education states in their own policies (set forth in 2001) that they shall ensure daily recess periods, as well as physical education programs that promote physical activities for all their students. No data is reported on current policies in this study, however. At Jefferson County Middle School in East Tennessee, the decision to have or not to have recess is made by the principal on staff, like it is in many other schools around the country. The principals in Jefferson County middle schools can solely make decisions on how many hours to teach core classes, and they are empowered to make many decisions, including eliminating recess, without approval from the local school board authorities. When the principal of Jefferson County Middle School was asked hypothetically if 490 parents were against the “no-recess” policy at her school of 590 students, and they had signed petitions reporting such, the principal replied that it would not have made a difference in her decision to eliminate recess this year. She regarded the recess cut as necessary to achieve or maintain academic achievement. This trend is becoming an alarming reality in communities, large and small across our country.

Some parents are not too thrilled with this lack of say in their children’s lives, however. The group, Parents’ Action for Children, founded in 1997 by actor/director Rob Reiner and his wife, Michele, is focused on raising national awareness about issues that affect the early

development of children, as well as school readiness, and this includes the importance of recess. The group was initially called the I Am Your Child Foundation (IAYC) and they worked with the White House, Congress and a variety of state and local officials to champion their causes. In 2004 the name of the organization was changed to reflect the expansion of their mission, “of harnessing the power of parents to stand up on issues that impact families and children.” (Parents Action, 2006)

In an article on the Parents’ in Action website, Marilyn Rauber encourages parents to stand up for their children’s basic human rights, to play, to relax and to take breaks like the rest of the grown ups around them. In this article, *Parent’s Aren’t sitting still as Recess Disappears*, we are told that schools seem to really have no choice in the matter of recess elimination because of the No Child Left Behind reforms that punish the schools that don’t “make the grade” when it comes to standardized testing. Schools across the country have been writing protest letters as part of the “Rescuing Recess” campaign launched in 2006 by the Cartoon Network. “A Georgia State University study found that fourth-graders who had PE three times a week but no recess were less focused and more fidgety than those who had both. Studies also show elementary school children are more physically active during recess than gym class.” (Rauber, 2006) This could, and most likely does, easily contribute to the childhood obesity problem in these United States. Many educators cite the excuse for recess elimination as justified because physical education is still required. Apparently providing physical education classes in lieu of recess isn’t enough for our students. “Recess is very, very high on the list” of parent demands, says Rochelle Davis, executive director of the Healthy Schools Campaign in Chicago. At the time of the article publication, she reports only one in five elementary schools in the Chicago area still had recess at all.

In another study, *The rewards and restrictions of recess: Reflections on being a playground volunteer*, we learn about the experiences of a playground volunteer that studied students at play during recess periods. She asked the question, “What are both the rewards as well as the restrictions of recess, from my perspective, as well as the children’s?” She also asks, “Why is recess increasingly seen as frivolous?” This researcher author, a teacher educator, happened to support her local principal’s desire to maintain recess for her students and thought she could be beneficial not only by volunteering on the playground, but by presenting a study that might reflect a positive light on the whole experience of recess. The experience, she said, “strengthened my resolve to be a committed advocate for that little piece of free play children are permitted in an increasingly demanding, controlled, and tightly scheduled day.” (O’Brien, 2003)

O’Brien spent a year as a playground volunteer and used some purposeful sampling to draw her conclusions. While she admits an unscientific approach in some areas of her instrument implementation, she draws the majority of her conclusions based on actual observation and documentation of said. Her study shows that recess facilitates empathy among peers, it establishes healthy single-gender play, and even a number of problems on occasion. The main emotion among the students that are allowed recess seems to be one of joyous exuberance. Students are excited to be able to simply play outdoors. These are, after all, children and they should be treated as such. She suggests also that teacher education programs consider recess the ideal time to observe social behavior in children and cites a study by Rike and Krueger done in 2000 that confirms her theory. O’Brien states that most people who have spent any moderate amount of time on a playground would most likely agree with this.

In this methodology of purposeful sampling, we see that regardless of the activity the students engage in, they all share an emotion of excitement about simply participating. Some of

the most popular activities included soccer, football, chase, swings and jumping rope. All of these activities promote healthy forms of exercise in a society of increasingly overweight children. O'Brien states in her conclusion "In summary, free, safe, relatively unrestricted play during recess is an essential requirement for helping children learn and grow." Kids at recess are learning how to resolve conflicts amongst their peers, structure their own play and games and they are teaching themselves and their peers to play fair. What the kids are learning will help them to solve problems in their adult lives, to express themselves more easily and to connect with peers in a healthy way.

Because of the time I spent as a playground volunteer this past year I now *know* schools need to consider the whole child and his or her development of agency and a positive sense of self. And I now *know* children need adults who are thoughtfully and continually considering both the rewards and the restrictions of recess. The more adults respond attentively and generously to what they consider, the more playgrounds will ring with the laughter of children playing freely, joyfully, with their whole selves. (O'Brien, 2003)

In the next study, *Recess Reports: Self-Identification of Students with Friendship Difficulties*, by Beth Doll and Patrick Murphy, we are reminded that recess comes with some problems. There is no evidence unveiled in their study that would call for its elimination, however. This 3-month study is based on the reality that students' social relationships with their peers are fundamental to their good mental health. Based on this assumption and studies done by a number of other researchers we are encouraged to conclude that fostering good mental health in school systems may well include retaining recess as a part of the curriculum. Today's children are the leaders of tomorrow, they are our future. "Consequently it is not surprising that

the adequacy of current peer relations is a powerful predictor of future socioemotional health.” (Asher & Hymel, 1986, Goodyer et al., 1989; Putallaz Y Gottman, 1982)

This study, *Recess Reports: Self-Identification of Students with Friendship Difficulties*, describes the “nature and frequency of students’ self-reported recess problems and the degree to which these were concomitant with low acceptance and diminished numbers of friends.” (Doll & Murphy, 1996) They find that while children with low peer acceptance may have a tough time coping with peer aggression, (as do all children) they do tend to resolve their conflicts more often without disrupting their friendships, given they have the opportunity to socialize in the setting of free play with their peers. Peer relationships are important to social health, undoubtedly. “There is good reason to believe that the nature and frequency of children’s social difficulties will diminish with ages.” (Doll & Murphy, 1996) This is presented with the assumption that they actually get to interact socially with others in their peer group.

The methodology of this study included third, fourth and fifth grade classrooms in two urban schools. Sixteen of seventeen classrooms invited to participate accepted the offer to be involved in the study. The results reports are based on 237 elementary school children. Information was collected using a report form consisting of 7 items. These items included, “having a rotten time; having to play alone; having a bad argument; not being allowed to join others in their games; being made fun of, called names or lied about; getting in fights (hitting, pushing and shoving) with others; and being told others wouldn’t be their friend anymore.” (Doll & Murphy, 1996) These items cover a broad spectrum of possible problems of social interaction among peers in a recess environment. In each case of data collection, the reports were completed by children directly after their play period, without prior notification that it was a data collection day beforehand. This helped to ensure validity by not influencing the children

to pay extra attention to the details of the recess time that they were going to be questioned about.

Although this study shows a myriad of problems that occur among peers at recess, it seems a good example to include in this content analysis because it shows the types of social conflicts that children must be exposed to in order to develop properly. If the kids can't resolve conflicts about playing, there doesn't seem to be much hope in them resolving conflict in serious life situations later. "It is clear then, that no single occurrence of any of the recess problems can be considered diagnostic of social risk, given the frequency with which these occurred in typical children." (Doll & Murphy, 1996) The results of this study conclude that the degree to which children are included in their peers' social circles of play is relevant to long-term social competence, which is conducive to better learning experiences and abilities.

In another position paper from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education and the Council on Physical Education for Children, titled *Recess for Elementary School Students*, we see more supporting evidence that recess is a necessary part of child's day. "It is the position of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) that all elementary school children should be provided with at least one daily period of recess of at least 20 minutes in length." (NASPE, 2006) This paper tells us that at least 16% of our nation's children are overweight and that recess gives children much more than the opportunity for physical activity. Recess provides students with time to not only develop healthy bodies, but time to enjoy movement and to practice life skills, such as cooperation, following rules, taking turns, communications, problem-solving and conflict resolution. In a study by the California Department of Education in 2005, we also see that participation in physical activity may improve attention, focus and aid in efficient learning in the classroom. In fact, extended periods of

inactivity, like sitting in a classroom, (for two hours or more) are discouraged for elementary-age children. (California Department of Education, 2005)

Various organizations support recess as a vital and necessary component of a full physical activity program. These organizations include, but are certainly not limited to, the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Department of Education, (USDHHS & USDE, 2000) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC, 1997) the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (NAEYC, 1998) and American Association for the Child's Right to Play. (IPA/USA, n.d) "National recommendations state that school-aged children and youth should participate in at least 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity." (NASPE, 2004; Strong, et al., 2005; USDHHS and USDA, 2005)

How can we, as a society, expect social behaviors to be acceptable from our students as they mature, if we don't allow them time to develop good social skills? According to The Newsletter for After-School and School-Age Care Professionals, we can not. "Recess, physical education, and play have all been reduced or eliminated while the length of the school day has been increased." (Scofield, 2003) After school programs, at one time were a great outlet for pent up physical energy and activity, but now there is increasing pressure on these programs to have homework programs as their main priority. Homework is important, sure, and often the children in after-school programs need help in this area, but it doesn't diminish the fact that physical activity is necessary as well. More children are obese; news of this is all around us. Modern media refers to our overweight children as an epidemic. It's not an arguable fact, kids need physical activity. You can hardly turn on the television without being able to find some report about how our kids need to exercise and to stop eating so unhealthy. There is a national campaign going on right now that includes the animated characters from the movie Shrek, which

promotes physical activity. This is becoming more and more necessary since we are allowing the extra physical activity to be removed from our children's school day.

For thousands of years physical activity in children was a built-in developmental drive that the environment usually allowed for. Perhaps when school systems realize they are exposed to lawsuits by parents of overweight children or even obese adults for denying the developmental necessity of physical activity, schools will make the changes needed for allowing physical movement and active play. (Scofield, 2003)

The Role of Recess in Children's Cognitive Performance and School Adjustment, by Anthony Pellegrini and Catherine Bohn suggests that "the recess period serves a positive purpose in the primary school curriculum, counter to the current practice of minimizing recess in many schools across North American and the United Kingdom." (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004) They present an argument for recess in daily curriculum and they go even further to delve into the realm of school accountability in the role regarding the healthy cognitive development of students. "They support their argument for the importance of recess with theory and with experimental and longitudinal data showing how recess breaks maximize children's cognitive performance and adjustment to school." (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004)

Pellegrini and Bohn initially propose the reasons for the reduction or elimination of recesses stems from schools simply trying to maximize instructional time in order to raise academic performance levels of students. In a study done in England by researchers Blatchford and Sumpner in 1998, we learn that the United Kingdom has a uniform implementation of breaks for their students. Pellegrini and Smith, in 1993 found that we have no such uniformity in the regulation or duration of breaks for our students. "In the United States, the ways that recess is

defined and implemented vary tremendously. Generally, individual schools determine policy for recess. In many cases, teachers *within the same school* varied the time and duration of recess periods.” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004) British students, however, across all grades, have breaks in their school day. The British students have a diminished time frame for breaks as they grow older, but in fact, they still are entitled to break times, nonetheless. The scale for their breaks is as follows: “93 minutes for children in infant school (5-7 years of age), 83 minutes for junior school (7-11 years of age), and 77 minutes for secondary students. (11-16 years of age).” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004)

These researchers agree that there is a need for accountability. If schools are going to eliminate recess or even to have recess, their decisions need to be based on the best available empirical evidence and theories available. Educators are responsible for teaching the whole child, and that includes socialization with peers in the school day. They hold the position that playful, not necessarily structured breaks may be especially important to proper cognitive development.

Furthermore, educators have an obligation to present evidence in support of their policies. To do otherwise is to squander the trust and resources of children, families and taxpayers. From this view, we present both theory (the cognitive immaturity hypothesis) and data to support the argument that what goes on during the recess period is education in the traditional sense (i.e., it affects attention to classroom lessons, achievement test performance and adjustment to school). (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004)

Since physical activity is required in schools, many schools justify the elimination of recess because physical education is taught within the curriculum. However, the Council on Physical

Education for Children stated in 2001 that this is not an acceptable substitution. Physical education classes are not lenient enough to the type of “behavioral flexibility” that helps children develop socially amidst their peer group. “The skills and self perceived competence associated with successful peer relations are related to children’s school success.” (Coie & Dodge, 1998) The development of socio-emotional support helps children to adjust to school situations as well as some other issues that arise in the course of their school careers.

One of the methodologies used in the series of field experiments was conducted in a public elementary school. They maneuvered recess times as well as seat work times for children in class. Days for recess were randomly selected and the before and after recess behavior of the children was coded for attentiveness in class. In some of the experiments the tasks that children worked on in the classroom activities was controlled. “The results indicated in all experiments that children were more attentive after than before recess.” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004) “Cognitive researchers have long recognized the importance of attention in learning.” (Driscoll, 2005)

The experiments were done separately in an indoor recess setting as well to try and determine if a sedentary break had the same effect on the children’s attention ability as the outdoor play had. The findings for the indoor recess and the outdoor recess were the same, children paid attention better after the recess breaks, regardless of where they enjoyed the break. “In short, these experiments support the idea that providing breaks over the course of instruction facilitates children’s attention to classroom tasks; physical activity did not seem to play an important role. That these results were obtained through well-controlled field experiments and replication across a number of studies instills confidence in the findings.” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004)

The experimental and longitudinal data presented in this article provides vehement support for the importance of recess in primary education settings. “Unstructured breaks from demanding cognitive tasks seem to facilitate school learning, as well as more general social competence and adjustment to school.” (Pellegrini & Bohn 2004) These researchers suggest that schools evaluate their own policies in light of the findings of their study and they encourage researchers to study the value of recess in children’s physical health as well as the socio-cognitive health in educational settings.

Another study regarding “play time” for students is, *A Time to Play: Premack’s Principle Applied in the Classroom*, by Brenda Geiger, who has a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and Statistics and her major interest is focused in childhood socio-emotional development. This study was published in October of 1996 and bases its structure entirely on the significance of Premack’s Principle. “This principle states that a preferred behavior, that is, a behavior that has a high probability of occurring, may be used as an effective reinforcer of a less preferred activity, that is, an activity that has a low frequency of occurrence.” (Geiger, 1996) Geiger approaches this study as not only a researcher, but an active substitute teacher with 42 student-subjects in the seventh and eighth grades. Her control subjects were 25 sixth grade student-subjects taught by another teacher. The reinforcer in the experiment was free time on an outdoor playground at the end of each class session.

Geiger’s report echoes the common theme, “The playground gives young teenagers the opportunity to develop a wide array of socio-cognitive skills.” (Geiger, 1996) So, we learn that social skill development is not only essential to primary education, but to the middle-school age children as well. By allowing these young teenagers the opportunity to “play” and develop social abilities in their peer groups, we see the students become better learners. By allowing

young adults to share the views and perspectives of other young adults, friendships are borne and develop naturally. This allowance of recess also tends to foster a more positive attitude toward school itself, which certainly would lead to higher academic achievement. This would stand to reason with no studies to support it, as it seems simple common sense. However, there are studies to enforce this concept, many, in fact. Some studies cited in Geiger's literature review are: "Garvey, 1990; Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983; Eiferman, 1970; Kohlberg, 1976; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977; Berndt, 1981; McGuire & Wiesz, 1982; Kanner, Feldmen, Weinberger & Ford, 1987; Epstein, 1983; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990 and Newman, Brody & Beauchamp, 1996" These are just a few examples of studies that results support not only recess, but free play and other unstructured breaks in the school day for the positive socio-cognitive development of adolescents. A few of these studies even show that play therapeutically alleviates stress and pent up tensions in young teenagers.

While less and less time is devoted to play time for older students, the necessary social development for these adolescents is vanishing. These pre-teen and teenage children are missing opportunities for communication with peers that may not be possible in any other setting for them, aside from the school environment. With the absence of these breaks to foster healthy development, Geiger predicts problem behavior and classroom disturbances to become more likely in classrooms.

With Premack's principle in mind, many program goals are set to manipulate academic behavior by way of reward and punishment. There are so many ways to reward students; some include giving or revoking privileges, food snacks, detentions, or the like. Geiger's study used free play on an outdoor playground as the reward or punishment with her seventh and eighth grade student-subjects. The sixth grade subjects were not given recess as a reward or punishment, but

rather five or ten minutes of quiet communication with classmates in the classroom at the end of their class, providing they met set requirements of the day. The seventh and eighth grade subjects also had to meet goals to receive their outdoor play time. The seventh and eighth graders were given a contingency contract to abide by in order to be allowed free play after each class. Some of the conditions in this contract were: all work had to be completed by each student, students were allowed to work in groups of two, but had to complete assignments separately, work had to be done efficiently, and finally when they did receive the reward of free play, they had to exit in a quiet, orderly fashion, or the privilege would be revoked.

The 'recess' reward proves to be the most powerful incentive tool in the result tally. "Invariably, for 52 class periods all 7th and 8th graders completed the work that had been assigned by their permanent teacher 5-10 minutes before the end of each class period. By contrast, the 6th graders finished their work 5 to 10 minutes before the bell rang only 6 percent of the class periods." (Geiger, 1996) For the discipline, the researcher reminded the 7th and 8th graders at the beginning to use their time wisely if they were to receive the reward of outdoor play and the 6th graders were also reminded at the beginning of each class period to use their time wisely in order to have free time at the end of the class period, but only in the classroom setting.

Geiger reported, of the 7th and 8th graders, "It allowed them to take a breath of oxygen, release built up stress, exchange feelings and ideas to calm down." Allowing the students to be responsible for their own breaks by way of reward or punishment led to the self-regulation of the group. They managed and motivated each other in order to get the free time, while the 6th grade group wasn't nearly as motivated to have free time indoors. The 7th and 8th grade student-subjects really worked for the incentive to be rewarded to them. Premack's principle can be easily seen through the differences in the two groups.

The connotations of this study are varied, but one of the main implications is that educators need to be aware of what privileges are better incentives in the eyes of the students. What an educator may deem an amazing reward, a student may not. We saw this proof positive from the 6th grade student-subjects. They obviously didn't think that free time within the structure of a classroom was anything special to work toward, while the teacher apparently did. Listening to the students would be good advice when trying to establish goals that can be rewarded.

It is therefore, suggested that middle schoolers and junior high school students should be given their medium of expression—play. Teachers and educators could take advantage of outdoor recess as an uncostly but extremely powerful incentive to stimulate students learning. This reinforcer would also reduce problem behavior in the classroom by helping young adolescents release built up tension and energy and allowing them to talk and share their experiences with their classmates. (Geiger, 1996)

In an ERIC digest titled, *Recess in Elementary School: What does the Research Say?*, Olga Jarrett proposes that the most obvious characteristic of recess is that it gives students a break from a daily routine. While many adults expect a break in their work day, many children do not expect one at all anymore at school. Jarrett reports that “For people of all ages and in all fields, breaks are considered essential for satisfaction and alertness. Experimental research on memory and attention (e.g. Toppino, Kasserman, & Mracek, 1991) found that recall is improved when learning is spaced rather than presented all at once.” Martens, in 1982 conducted longitudinal research in French and Canadian schools that showed positively that physical activity did not detract from academic achievement. The results of the less-formal education

brought increased physical fitness, better attitudes among student groups and slightly better test scores. “These results are consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis of nearly 200 studies on the effect of exercise on cognitive functioning that suggest that physical activity supports learning. (Etnier et al., 1997)

When it comes to recess and social development, Jarrett warns that recess may actually be the only opportunity that some students may have during the course of their day to participate in social interactions with their peers. Many children, at the end of their school days go to empty homes with very little or no social engagements with peers at all. During the course of a school day without recess breaks there may be minimal or even no social engagement among other students the entire day. Again we see that social behaviors during recess are a prime opportunity for adults to observe children’s social tendencies and actions. Without this assessment tool available, many children may suffer mentally in their lives. For instance, the kids that bully or fight can at least be helped if their behavior is noticeable on the playgrounds. Without the social outlets, many children just may not develop the social skills they need in adulthood. “The available research suggests that recess can play an important role in the learning, social development, and health of elementary school children. While there are arguments against recess, no research clearly supports not having recess.” (Jarrett, 2003)

Finally, we come to the 2006 Clinical Report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, presented as guidelines to the Clinician in Rendering Pediatric Care, *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*. This report is presented by Kenneth R. Ginsburg MD, MS Ed, and the Committee on Communications and Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. “This report offers guidelines on how pediatricians can advocate for children by helping families, school systems, and

communities consider how best to ensure play is protected as they seek the balance in children's lives to create the optimal development milieu." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006)

The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that every child not only deserves the chance to develop their unique possibilities, but acknowledges that children have the right to "reap all the advantages associated with play." They recommend that child advocates pay attention to factors that may interfere with the best possible cognitive development and that these advocates should work toward promoting situations or circumstances that follow this aspiration. These guidelines are presented in answer to the "multiple forces challenging play. The overriding premise is that play (or some available free time in the case of older children and adolescents) is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006) We must find the balance in children's lives in order for them to develop academically, socially and emotionally.

Play is important to imagination, developing motor skills and emotional strength. "Play is important to healthy brain development...Undirected play allows children to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006) When children are allowed to develop creatively, they can truly realize their personal goals. Without this healthy creative exercising, they may not be open to developing their fullest potential. This report tells us that play is fundamental in the educational environment. Yet another echo that tells us play and unstructured free time helps children to maintain or learn healthy social development among peers and that play is an essential element of social-emotional learning.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 focuses on higher achievement in reading and mathematics. Less time is being devoted to physical education, recess, and even the creative arts

because of the pressures of this reform act. “This change may have implications on children’s ability to store new information, as children’s cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity...Even a formal structured physical education class may not offer the same benefit as free-play recess.” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006)

After-school enrichment programs or after-care programs can be beneficial to children that may not have been allowed free-play during the school day, but more and more frequently, these after school programs are just centered on academic achievement. These programs, too, are feeling the pressure from school administrators and even parents to focus on homework and mentoring programs instead of play time. Barriers to children blocking their free play time with peers includes their hectic schedules, both parents working full time jobs and the elimination of recess in many schools. Sometimes pressures to achieve academically come very early in a child’s life. Pressure to get into a good pre-school, the building of the college resume and excessive amounts of homework can cause retardation in social and emotional health. Stress is a killer, who among us hasn’t heard this message? Some children that might normally be allowed to play outside with friends may not be able to because of high crime and lack of protection in their neighborhoods. Some parents may arrive home too late to get their children involved in peer-centered activities, such as community sport teams. School may be the only place some children have the opportunity to develop peer relationships.

Stress and anxiety are contributing factors to depression. More colleges are seeing students with depression and anxiety among the student body. “A survey by the American College Health Association reported that 61% of college students had feelings of anxiety and depression with that of perfectionism and over critical self-evaluation...some experts believe

today's pressured lifestyle is an important contributor.” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006)

With the busy schedules, lack of breaks, high pressure academic settings, pressure to excel in college and lack of proper peer interaction, our children are left to deduce that the best job, their best job, must be achieved at all costs. We must, as a nation, teach our students that they have intrinsic value. This is integral to their personal search for an area to excel in, especially in the areas of academics or socialization. Considerations must be given to activities that help to reduce stress so the students can actually enjoy free time.

Some strategies for promotion of healthy youth maturity and inner strength can be found in the school systems, in the community and especially at home. Colleges need to dispel the misconception that only perfect students need apply and that perfectionism is an actual phenomenon. Children must know that they are truly loved, first and foremost. We need to listen to our children. More often than not, they can tell us just what they are missing.

In the recommendation to Clinicians form, we see that pediatricians should educate themselves about community resources that promote play or free play for kids. Pediatricians should also encourage parents to make sure their children feel love and not pressure to succeed as a primary emotion. “Pediatricians can join with other child professionals and parents to advocate for educational settings that promote optimal academic, cognitive, physical, social and emotional development for children and youth.” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006) Pediatricians are also cautioned to be aware of physical symptoms related to stress, anxiety and depression.

Play is a cherished part of childhood that offers children important developmental benefits and parents the opportunity to fully engage with their children. However,

multiple forces are interacting to effectively reduce many children's ability to reap the benefits of play. As we strive to create the optimal developmental milieu for children, it remains imperative that play is included with academic and social enrichment opportunities and that safe environments are made available to all children. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006)

These are findings from the people we consider experts in our country. They are experts in the fields of education, psychology and medicine and they say recess is important to the healthy cognitive development of our children, from grade school to high school. Where is recess going if it is so beneficial to our children? What are school administrators basing their decisions on when they decide to take away breaks from children? It is an easily discernable fact that they are not taking away their own breaks, however. There seems to be no apparent evidence that the elimination of recess is beneficial in any way to our students, but there are certainly volumes of evidence that say it is not only beneficial, but necessary to proper growth and development. Children in school have a right to free time in the course of their days, just like adults do.

“Educators can help children answer that most crucial question: Who am I in the world? We must—parents, educators, concerned citizens, even the children themselves—*resist* the trend toward limiting recess and instead be tireless advocates for it; free, open-ended outdoor play is a necessity and the right of every child. Our advocacy for recess is one very important way we can support the irrepressible possibility of humans.” (NAECS/SDE, 2001)

Discussion

We, as educators, as parents and as students, must demand attention to the results of these studies. “We need to start asking more from our citizens and start making our citizens more responsible and giving them more control and authority over their own lives.” (Booker, 2001) We are violating children’s basic human rights, the right to liberty, to a break after a long learning session, to a breath of fresh air in the course of their day, and basic equality as members of the human race. These children are our future. Dare we teach them to be unfair, to promote unjust behavior, to not enjoy the overall experience of learning? With learning comes great achievement, with great achievement comes positive change...why are we making decisions based on the assumptions of a few men, when many educational researchers have studied and persevered for these true facts reported in this study. We can no longer ignore the results of these endeavors. It is time to take action and stand up for what we know to be proven, that recess is an essential part of a student’s day, regardless of the grade. As adults we all expect a break in the day for some outside air, for a walk if we so desire, or for just a few minutes of unstructured time. Why don’t we collectively think that these young versions of adults would feel differently? Certainly they deserve the same respect as we give our adult members of society.

“Truly what Martin Luther King said ‘we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality and tied to a common destiny,’ is true. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” (Booker, 2001) Are we violating our children’s basic rights with the elimination of recess? Yes, it seems most certain and obvious that we are. All those who sit idly by and watch our children’s social abilities decline, are accountable and even guilty of this crime of injustice against the children of our country. It’s time to be a voice in our communities and in

our schools. The effects of poor cognitive development will reach far into our future if we don't stand up for the rights of our children today.

In regard to the studies analyzed in this report, we can and we should hold our schools and our educators, as well as ourselves, responsible for the promotion of the healthy cognitive development of our nation's children. There are ways to implement (or re-establish) fair recess time, or unstructured breaks in a student's day that will help to promote this healthy development. The call for more educational research in this area is made. We need to consider study as well on possible regulation of recess periods in our nation's schools. We must look to similar structured break periods like the ones in England and Asia for models of successful student break times, if necessary.

All we have to do really is listen to the students of today. They want to have breaks, they need them, and it is a proven fact. All you have to do is read the results of the studies to see. They want to socialize with their friends at recess and they want to run and play outside. It is a necessary thing for them to do. We have no right to strip this basic right from these children. From elementary school to high school kids, they all want this. Ask them and you will see. They are entitled to this one small thing that makes such a huge difference in their lives for the whole duration of their lives. These kids are willing to work towards this, even though they really shouldn't have to. We saw that the group of 7th and 8th grade school kids in one of the studies went so far as to self-regulate themselves to be rewarded with just 5 or 10 minutes of free time. They deserve a chance to be heard.

America, are you listening?

Limitations

While this study is comprised of results from eleven separate studies, there were limitations to the process. Time was a factor because the researcher only had roughly a month to collect data and analyze results of the studies. There seems to be a very limited number of studies on the benefit of recess in a student's day, contrarily there are ample studies on the benefits of physical activity for children in general. This is most likely due to the newness of recess elimination in our nation's schools. The studies found ranged in approach, from casual and fairly unscientific to formal and highly scientific in data collection methods. There were no studies found in this researchers fairly extensive search that were contradictory to the overall theme of the studies presented, that recess and break times are beneficial to a child's healthy cognitive development. A formal study is in process by the researcher to evaluate the emotional development of students in regard to the lack of unstructured break time in certain school districts, but because it is not complete, no results were available at this time. Results will be reported when the study reaches completion.

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