

# Advocating for Play: The Benefits of Unstructured Play in Public Schools

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## Abstract

This study offers a look inside one school community. The school implemented Let Grow Play Club and a recently expanded 40-minute recess period. Data are from observations of children's play periods, child interviews, and teacher interviews. We argue that play has significant cognitive, emotional, and social benefits for elementary school children. Periods of play at school help students to focus, build friendships, improve mood, work cooperatively, and work through conflict without adult intervention. The study has implications for the expansion of play, including recess and programs like Let Grow Play Club, for *all* schools as a social justice issue.

Key Words: recess, unstructured play, schools, elementary children, teachers, social, emotional, cognitive development, social justice, before, afterschool

## Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 31 promotes a child's rights to play and to enjoy a full cultural and artistic life (United Nations, 1989). Play is an essential part of children's social, emotional, creative, and cognitive well-being (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Barros et al., 2009). Expanding the right of children to play can also be seen as a mechanism to increase integration and equality among students in low-income communities (Lester & Russell, 2010; Rico & Janot, 2019). Play in schools has been a recent topic

of public interest and policy debate, as states and school districts have grappled with how much time to devote to recess in schools (e.g., Holson, 2019; Jarrett, 2019; Lou, 2019). Faced with increased school accountability, student-testing programs, more demanding curriculum, and government sanctions for poorly performing schools, many school communities have reduced their recess time or completely eliminated recess from the school day (Barros et al., 2009; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012). Researchers, health professionals, and educational leaders believe that allowing periods of play is even more important as schools reopen from COVID-19, as “seeing their friends, playing, and being outside add normalcy to the school day” allowing children to “heal from their collective trauma” (McNamara et al., 2020, p. 1).

In recent years, some school systems have reinstated unstructured recess driven by frustrated teachers, parents, and advocacy groups. Four states have implemented recess laws; Missouri, Florida, New Jersey, and Rhode Island mandate 20 minutes of unstructured play and daily recess for elementary students (Shammas, 2019). Arizona passed a law in 2018 that requires all schools that have grades K–5 to have two recess periods per school day. The law does not stipulate a specific schedule or time for recess, although some schools provide at least one recess before the school day starts. Seven more states—Iowa, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Connecticut, and Virginia—now require between 20 and 30 minutes of daily activity for elementary schools, leaving it up to schools how to allocate time. Connecticut lawmakers recently proposed a bill to increase that state’s time commitment to 50 minutes (Holson, 2019). Although many parents, teachers, lawmakers, and recess advocates wanted schools to require 50 minutes of undirected play during the school day, the bill did not pass. Instead, a new law was passed that allows school boards to offer extra time for undirected play in elementary schools beyond the required 20 minutes of daily physical exercise (Merrigan, 2019). These policy movements have received pushback in other states as well; for example, Georgia’s governor recently vetoed a bill requiring all elementary schools to have recess every day, saying it was a decision for local school boards (Lou, 2019).

Differences in time allotted for recess also falls along race and class lines, with more affluent and White schools having more generous recess policies; given the benefits of play for students, recess can therefore be seen as a social justice issue (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2007; Roth et al., 2003). In a nationwide, time-diary study, Roth et al. (2003) found that 21% of school children did not have recess. They also noted demographic disparities, including the fact that 39% of African American students versus 15% of White students did not have recess. Additionally, 44% of children living below the poverty line versus 17% of those above the poverty line were deprived of recess,

and 25% of children scoring below the mean on a standardized test versus 15% of those above the mean did not have recess. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2007) surveyed 1,055 schools and found similar disparities between social classes and the length of recess. Time for recess was affected by school size, location, region, minority enrollment, and eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch.

This research is a case study of one public elementary school in a district where administration has placed great value on unstructured play for children. The administration and staff value mixed-age play and offer students at least 40 minutes of recess per day. As part of this dedication to play, the superintendent implemented Let Grow Play Club (<https://letgrow.org/>) before school one day per week for students across all seven elementary schools. In the school featured in this study, participants were selected by lottery due to receiving far more volunteers than available spots in the program. Designed by Lenore Skenazy (2010) to help families and communities bring unstructured play back to schools and communities, Let Grow Play Club is a before or after school program where students engage in free, unstructured play in mixed-age groups. This study is part of a collaboration between a northeastern private university and a public elementary school to examine the implementation of Let Grow Play Club and, by extension, the importance of unstructured play for children in schools. We collected numerous types of data about both Play Club and recess, including nine weeks of observation data of Play Club, three weeks of observation data of recess, child interviews, and teacher interviews. In this article, we address the following three research questions:

1. What are the patterns of play behaviors during Let Grow Play Club and recess in one school community?
2. What are children's perceptions of Let Grow Play Club?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of Let Grow Play Club and recess?

The results show the importance of unstructured play for children and the larger school community, as unstructured play creates a needed sense of community among students. We contribute to existing literature by exploring how the length of recess/play matters for the school community and, importantly, how play programs such as Let Grow Play Club can be used to expand play opportunities amidst COVID-19 concerns.

## **Research and Theory on the Cognitive Benefits of Recess**

Existing literature clearly supports the importance of unstructured play and recess for children's cognitive and social/emotional development (Burriss &

Burriss, 2011; Real Play Coalition, 2020). Cognitive development occurs as children receive recovery time from a highly structured academic school day. Children experience a sense of freedom that encourages them to be involved in interactive games that foster conversations and create authentic opportunities for problem solving.

Whitt-Glover et al. (2011) implemented Instant Recess® to improve physical activity and behavior in eight elementary schools with third, fourth, and fifth grade students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Instant Recess® was an intervention with elementary students using structured physical activities. Students who engaged in Instant Recess® exhibited statistically significant increases in light physical activity (51%) and moderate-intensity physical activity (16%) as well as increases in time spent in on-task behavior (11%) following periods of play. The research suggests that breaks for recess and play promote optimal learning of academic tasks and improvement of classroom behaviors.

Previous research also provides theoretical bases for the benefits of play on cognition for children. Bohn-Gettler and Pellegrini (2014) and Pellegrini (2005) discuss complementary theories to retain and increase the frequency of play and recess periods: (1) distributed practice and (2) cognitive immaturity. The first is the evidence on how learning and behavior benefits from distributed practice. The second concerns the development of cognitive efficiency and age-related factors and follows David Bjorklund's cognitive immaturity hypothesis, as discussed below (Bjorklund, 1997; Bjorklund & Green, 1992).

### **Distributed Practice**

Dempster (1988) studied the spacing effect on school tasks (e.g., math facts, vocabulary words, etc.). He suggested that children's learning is more effective when tasks are distributed and spaced out throughout the day. Distributing or spacing classroom instruction can make instruction less boring and increase children's attention. The effects of distributed practice on children's attention to school tasks have not been seen in many classroom studies; classroom studies undertaken examine mass rather than distributed practice. A few exceptions are Rohrer et al. (2005) and Rohrer and Taylor (2006) observing students taught abstract mathematics skills. Both studies suggest that mathematical problem solving is increased when students spaced out practice sessions. Rohrer et al.'s (2005) study found overlearning or repeated practice of skills diminishes with time. The long-term retention in solving mathematics problems was greater by distributing (or spacing) practice across multiple sessions rather than concentrating or massing the same amount of practice into one session. Similarly, Rohrer and Taylor (2006) found massed practice and overlearning produce poor long-term retention. Godwin et al. (2016)

measured how attentive elementary students were during class and found that they spent over a quarter of the time distracted, unable to focus on the teacher or the current task. Teachers found it more effective to give several 10-minute lessons instead of 30-minute ones. Recess breaks can be provided to children within the spacing of classroom instruction.

With reference to the role of recess and unstructured play, research tells us that elementary students' classroom behaviors and academic performance change when provided recess breaks (Barros et al., 2009; Erwin et al., 2019; Jarrett et al., 1998; Koerner, 2019; Pellegrini & Davis, 1993; Pellegrini et al., 1995). Children are more attentive to learning and less restless after a recess break. A 15-minute daily recess break was associated with better scores on a teachers' rating of class behavior with 8-to-9-year-old children (Barros et al., 2009). Jarrett et al. (1998) conducted a study to determine the effects of recess on classroom behaviors, specifically the ones they classified as working, fidgeting, and listlessness. They found that recess affected children's attention to task behavior—children are less on task and more fidgety when denied recess breaks. Koerner (2019) replicated Jarrett et al.'s (1998) study with first grade students and found similar results. Pellegrini and Davis (1993) and Pellegrini et al. (1995) found that elementary school children become increasingly distracted when recess is delayed, which results in additional play when recess occurs.

### **Cognitive Immaturity**

Cognitive immaturity theory suggests that young children may benefit from unstructured play in the school curriculum (Bjorklund, 1997; Bjorklund & Green, 1992; Burriss & Burriss, 2011). Young children think differently from older children, who think differently from adults. According to Burriss and Burriss (2011), "Interference builds when children, who are not cognitively mature, repeat highly structured tasks" (p. 2). Cognitive immaturity theory suggests that young children may benefit from recess regimens. School performance requires that children be able to focus their attention and resist distraction. Schools can do little to hasten the maturation of attentional skills in primary school children, but they can organize school schedules to provide daily recess and playful break times with peer interactions to maximize primary children's cognitive performance. To Burriss and Burriss (2011), "it is not merely a question of allowing time outdoors in play; unstructured play provides children a renewed engagement with learning to occur" (p. 2). Not only will breaks during long periods of cognitive work reduce cognitive interference, but peer interaction during recess helps children learn and develop important social skills.

Studies provide support for the importance of play and recess breaks with primary children (Pellegrini, 1992, 2005; Yesil Dagli, 2012). Pellegrini's (2005) two-year longitudinal study in a diverse Georgia public school indicated that data collected from a kindergarten readiness assessment predicted first grade achievement. More importantly, the observed behaviors on the playground were more indicative of first grade academic achievement. According to Pellegrini (2005), "What kids do on the playground accounts for a statistically significant, and unique, portion of the variation (40%) beyond what standardized tests tell us" (p. 145).

Bjorklund's (Bjorklund, 1997; Bjorklund & Green, 1992) cognitive immaturity theories suggest that breaks for preschool and young primary school children should be playful and unstructured. Providing time (recess and free play) for children to interact with peers and open-ended materials with minimal adult direction should improve school performance. Both cognitive and social/emotional skills are related, and recess (indoor and outdoor) offers the opportunity for growth to help children adapt to school and societal norms.

Yesil Dagli's (2012) research also addressed cognitive immaturity and the benefits of play, but further suggested that socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity influence the availability of play for young children. Yesil Dagli used a nationally representative sample of kindergarten children to examine reading scores and recess. Students' gender, race/ethnicity, family SES, initial reading scores, and age were controlled. The research found that regular periods of recess, at least once a day, improved reading scores for students. However, recess exposure of kindergarten students varied by race/ethnicity and family SES. The percentage of students without any scheduled recess was greater for African American and Hispanic students than it was for White students. The frequency and length of recess in a day were associated with SES. Among students who had scheduled recess, greater percentages of African American and Hispanic students had recess once a week, compared to White and Asian students who had recess several times a week. Students from low-SES families tended to have shorter recess periods (Yesil Dagli, 2012).

## **Research on Social and Emotional Benefits of Recess**

Play and recess develop children's social and emotional skills. All types of free play, from fantasy to rough-and-tumble play, have a crucial role in children's development. The Real Play Coalition (2020) believes that play is "best understood as a set of feelings, actions, and experiences that children enjoy" (p. 19). It is often during recess that children engage in free, unstructured play. Conflicts may emerge between children during these periods of unstructured

play (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999), yet it is also during these periods where children learn to have confidence in their ability to solve a problem and become resilient when faced with challenges (Jarrett, 2019; Pepler & Ross, 1981; Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001; Wyver & Spence, 1999). As pointed out by Ginsburg (2007), “Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and learn self-advocacy skills” (p. 183). During unstructured play and recess, children gain skills in conflict resolution by playing with peers, learning how to share, take turns, and be a leader, as well as collaborating and negotiating around games and rules (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014; Jambor, 1994; Pellegrini & Glickman, 1989). Research suggests that play supports crucial developmental skills in creativity and imagination (Craft, 2005; Saracho, 2002; Tsai, 2012). Tsai (2012) reviewed empirical research related to play, creativity, and imagination and suggests that “the perspective of affect in play coupled with imagination will maximize creative potentials” (p. 18). Bohn-Gettler and Pellegrini (2014) state, “Recess may be one of the only opportunities children have to interact freely with peers to build friendships” (p. 325). Recess offers children unstructured opportunities to self-select friends and playmates, to play with children of different genders, test relationships, and learn to communicate and cooperate with other children.

Many skills children learn while playing are crucial for success in the 21st century. To learn about the world and achieve success in a global economy, individuals must be socially competent and highly creative. The 6 Cs—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, content knowledge, and confidence—are essential to children’s future success (Trilling & Fadel, 2011). Many of these skills are not taught in the classroom, but are learned as children engage in unstructured play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Neuroscientists, social psychologists, and business leaders highlight creativity, flexibility, resilience, and highly developed social/emotional skills for success in the economies of tomorrow (Real Play Coalition, 2020).

Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (2007) suggests that the increase in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may result from the lack of social play. The rise has coincided with a reduction in play in the early years, less recess in public schools, and diminishing outdoor spaces. According to Panksepp (2007), “Abundant prosocial play will facilitate maturation of the frontal lobe inhibitory skills that regulate children’s impulsive primary-process emotional urges” (p. 58). Panksepp (2007) suggests society establish play sanctuaries for at-risk children in order to facilitate frontal lobe maturation and the development of prosocial minds as alternatives to the use of play-reducing psychostimulants.

As pointed out by psychologist Peter Gray (2011), play functions as the means by which children: (1) make decisions and solve problems, (2) learn to regulate emotions, (3) make friends, and (4) experience joy. Gray (2011, 2018) contends that the lack of play over the years has had lasting and negative effects on children. He feels that play has declined from the 1950s to today. A causal chain between the increase in depression and anxiety appears to be that with reduced freedom to play, children do not have a strong sense of control over their lives (Gray, 2018). Children today should have the same opportunities for frequent unstructured free play as did children of past generations. School recess may be the best time for guaranteeing all children time to play and control their own activities.

### **Method**

This mixed methods study draws upon observations, child interviews, and teacher interviews to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014; Gibbs, 2017). This study examines the implementation of Let Grow Play Club at a Long Island, NY elementary school and, more generally, children's and teachers' perceived benefits of such unstructured play. Let Grow Play Club is a before or afterschool program where students can engage in free play in mixed-age groups. During Play Club, tools for play are available (e.g., jump ropes, balls, cardboard boxes), and adults are there to oversee activities, but the stress is on children developing games and negotiating peer interactions without adult interference. The Long Island school in this study implemented Let Grow Play Club for one hour before school every Friday.

### **Context**

The elementary school in this study contains approximately 460 children between kindergarten and fifth grade. According to 2017 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, 36.5% of students at the school come from low-income backgrounds, as measured by the percentage who receive free or reduced lunch. The student body is predominantly White; 62.4% of students are White, 29.5% Hispanic, 2.2% Black, 2.6% Asian, and 3.3% two or more races. The school is unique in that administrators already place a firm emphasis on the importance of play, including mixed-age play, for child development. The school has 40-minute recess periods, mixed-age recess, and a number of different play environments (i.e., discovery center, small gym, large gym, outdoors). Hence, Let Grow Play Club was more of an extension of existing school and district philosophy, adding an additional play period, rather than a deviation from it.

## Participants

Children were chosen for Play Club based on a lottery system. A letter from the principal was sent home describing Play Club (see sample letter, Appendix B). Parents signed consent forms, and 100 children from grades kindergarten to fifth grade (approximately 16 per grade) were chosen to participate in a 10-week session in the fall or a 10-week session in the spring. If a child participated in the fall, they were excluded from the lottery in the spring. The data here are from the fall session. Play Club children came to school at 8 A.M. on Friday, and parents were responsible for transportation. Many families car-pooled, some parents had assistance from relatives, and some children were already enrolled in a before-care program.

We sent letters and consent forms home to the parents of the 100 students involved in Play Club asking permission to interview their children about Play Club. We only interviewed the 47 children who returned their parent permission form: six kindergarten students, six first grade students, six second grade students, six third grade students, 12 fourth grade students, and 11 fifth grade students.

We decided to interview teachers after we had started our analysis of the child interviews in hopes of getting the teachers' perspectives on a few main themes. The principal sent an email to all teachers asking if anyone would be willing to do a brief interview about recess and Let Grow Play Club. Six teachers expressed an interest in participating, including two kindergarten teachers, three first grade teachers, and one fifth grade teacher. In addition to these interviews, we were invited to observe one staff meeting when recess and play were a topic of discussion for all of the teachers and support staff in the school.

## Data Collection

We, as university faculty researchers, received approval for this study from our university's Institutional Review Board, the district's superintendent, and the school principal. For the sake of confidentiality, we do not include the names of the school, district, teachers, or children involved in this study.

We collected nine weeks of observation data in one school using a revised Outdoor Play Club Inventory<sup>®</sup> (Chau et al., 2012; Jarrett et al., 2001; see Appendix A). We conducted observations of nine one-hour Let Grow Play Club sessions ( $n = 211$  child observations) and three 40-minute recess sessions ( $n = 61$  child observations). We observed children's play in three-minute intervals, coding the observed child's primary physical behavior, any passive watching, and all language behaviors observed during the interval. To assure interobserver reliability, all coders practiced coding during an outdoor recess session, simultaneously watching the same children and comparing data until there was over

80% agreement between raters. Data collected in this practice session were not included in the final data. Between two and four coders were used during each data session, with each coder positioning themselves at different places in the play area to capture unique play activities and avoid observing the same child as other coders. Observers carried clipboards with observation sheets and timers, and every three minutes the coder changed the observation sheet, reset the timer, and directed her/his attention to another child at random.

We interviewed students attending Let Grow Play Club immediately following Play Club. For the purposes of this paper, we analyzed student responses to the following questions: How does a day with Play Club feel different from a day without Play Club? What made Play Club great and fun today? How is Play Club different from recess?

The interviews with the six teachers each lasted between 8 and 19 minutes. All teachers were asked the following questions:

- What changes have you seen in recess (over the last 5 years)?
- Do you think these changes affect how students are within the classroom? If so, what do you think are the effects?
- Do you see any benefits to longer recess? If so, what? Can you give me an example?

While child interviews centered on Play Club, many children discussed the benefits of play more generally. Similarly, teacher interviews asked about unstructured play more generally, but Play Club came up organically in each interview.

Finally, we participated in one faculty meeting at the school when the elementary school faculty discussed recess and play. The school principal primarily led the one-hour meeting, though one of the researchers asked additional questions during the discussion.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from observations were analyzed using SPSS. All variables in our observation data are dummy coded, with 1 indicating the presence of the behavior. We used a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze our qualitative data, seeing which themes emerged from our transcribed child interviews, teacher interviews, and the faculty meeting. We went through all of the transcripts first using open coding. After we identified recurrent themes, specifically cognitive, social, and emotional benefits, we went back through the transcripts with more focused coding to detect each time that one of these themes came up within the interviews. The results are presented by research question, and thus data type (observations, child interviews, and

teacher interviews). We found that some themes spanned types of data, while others just appeared in one data source. For example, both teachers and children discussed the cognitive benefits of recess (improved focus), while only children talked about recess having emotional benefits (improved mood).

## Results

### Patterns of Play Behavior

Our first research question examines the patterns of play during Let Grow Play Club and recess. We chose to observe recess as a comparison group, a period of play for students within the same school, to compare to Play Club. Recess was shorter (40 versus 60 minutes) and only had one grade level present. As shown in Table 1, observations of children's play demonstrated a substantial amount of active play during Play Club and recess. Some form of active play was recorded in 98.9% of observations, most notably playing games (59.9% of observations), playing with equipment (30.1% of observations), and running (27.9% of observations). We observed statistically similar amounts of chasing, running, walking, playing on equipment, vigorous activities, and passive behavior for Play Club and recess.

We did notice differences in game behavior in our comparisons between Play Club (60 minutes) and recess (40 minutes). As seen in Table 1, we witnessed significantly more games, specifically invented games and ball games, in the longer Play Club sessions. This was corroborated in interviews with students: 29 of the 47 students (61.7%) mentioned playing games with other students—like soccer, hand ball, or “vampire tag”—in Play Club. We believe, as did the teachers we interviewed (see below), that these longer play periods give students valuable time to work cooperatively.

*(see next page for Table 1)*

Table 1. Active and Passive Behavior During Play Club and Recess Observations

Activity	Play Club ( <i>N</i> = 211)	Recess ( <i>N</i> = 61)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 272)
Active Behavior (ANY)	0.995 (0.069)	0.967 (0.180)	0.989 (0.105)
Chasing/Movements <sup>1</sup>	0.583 (0.494)	0.541 (0.502)	0.574 (0.495)
Running	0.265 (0.443)	0.328 (0.473)	0.279 (0.450)
Walking	0.166 (0.373)	0.115 (0.321)	0.154 (0.362)
Vigorous Activity <sup>2</sup>	0.119 (0.479)	0.098 (0.324)	0.114 (0.318)
Playing with Equipment <sup>3</sup>	0.294 (0.457)	0.344 (0.479)	0.301 (0.461)
Games <sup>4</sup>	0.649 (0.478)	0.426* (0.499)	0.599 (0.491)
Standard Games with Rules	0.028 (0.167)	0.033 (0.180)	0.029 (0.169)
Invented Games with Rules	0.066 (0.249)	0.016* (0.013)	0.055 (0.229)
Ball Games	0.280 (0.450)	0.164* (0.373)	0.254 (0.436)
Passive Behavior (ANY)	0.132 (0.340)	0.098 (0.300)	0.125 (0.331)

Notes. \* $p < .05$ , chi-square test demonstrates significant difference between Play Club and recess.

<sup>1</sup> Chasing/Movements includes running, playing tag, jumping, and walking.

<sup>2</sup> Vigorous Activity includes wrestling, tackling, tumbling, push/pull, spinning, skipping, or dancing.

<sup>3</sup> Playing with Equipment includes climbing structures, bars, slides, blocks, Legos, or loose parts.

<sup>4</sup> Games includes standard games with rules, invented games with rules, ball games, catch, hiding, jump rope, hula hoop, building, pretending, or singing games.

### Children's Perceptions of Let Grow Play Club and Recess

Our second research question addresses children's perceptions of Let Grow Play Club and recess. Interestingly, students talked about the importance of time to play within the interviews. When asked about how Play Club and recess are different, 18 children mentioned having more time to play in Play Club as compared to recess. Of the students who elaborated, one fourth grade boy stated, "It's different because of you get an hour of just play. I really like that!" In response to the question of what students would tell the principal of a school without Play Club, one student said, "I will tell them that they should start it so that kids that don't get a lot of time to play, they can play at Play Club." Students recognize the time to play as important. But why? Students identified three main benefits of Play Club, namely increased focus during school, improved mood, and opportunities to build friendships. Students were asked specifically about Play Club in their interviews, though the stated benefits of this free play can be applied to recess.

*Focus*

Whether in the middle of the day or the morning, the time of active play was seen as important for students' attention span in the classroom. When asked how a day with Play Club was different from a day without Play Club, six of the 43 queried students (14.0%) mentioned that Play Club improved their focus or readiness for the school day. For example, one fifth grade girl noted that Play Club "calms you down, and then you can get ready to learn in your class and focus." Similarly, another fifth grade girl described a day with Play Club as "really fun, and it was a good time for the morning so I can just, when I come in, I can just learn." Students felt more ready for the school day after playing.

*Mood*

While some articulate children were able to talk about their focus and readiness to learn, some just spoke of the benefits for their energy level and mood. Of the 43 students asked what was different about a day with Play Club, seven (16.3%) noted improved mood. A third grade boy stated that he likes Play Club "cause then I'm in a good mood." Several students discussed their need to release their energy, like a fifth grade girl who said Play Club made her happy "cause I like to play a lot in the mornings and stuff, 'cause I have a lot of energy" or a fifth grade girl who said, "I feel really happy 'cause I get my energy out and stuff." According to one fifth grade boy, the benefits of play can extend far beyond the morning play period: "When we go into class, it feels better than not playing at all...because all the kids get to have more fun, and it makes them feel good inside the rest of the day." Thus, students saw a clear benefit to play for students' mood and academic readiness during the school day. As highlighted in previous studies, periods of play have positive impacts on students in terms of academic performance (Jarrett et al., 1998) and mental well-being (Gray, 2011).

*Friendships*

When students were asked what they liked about Play Club, they repeatedly noted that they liked making new friends. Within the interviews, 26 of the students (55.3%) mentioned friends or friendships at Play Club. The different combinations of students from across grade levels gave students opportunities to play with different children than they typically played with in recess. According to students involved in Play Club:

You can make new friends, so you can meet new people, because if you don't have a lot of friends, then Play Club's the perfect place, because there's a lot of people there. There's a lot of people that like to play.  
(Fourth grade boy)

Kids that don't get a lot of time to play, they—they can play at Play Club. (Fifth grade boy)

There was this friend that I never play with before, and I wanted to play with her, and I tried playing with her today, and she was really nice. (Second grade girl)

What made Play Club great was seeing all the kids interact with each other and having fun and using teamwork. (Fourth grade boy)

'Cause there's a whole bunch of kids there. (Kindergarten girl)

Students felt that Play Club gave them the space to establish friendships, sometimes across grade levels, and work collaboratively. As noted in the previous results section, 29 of the 47 children interviewed reported playing games with their peers during Play Club—working collaboratively with their new friends. While these comments are specific to Play Club, creating large mixtures of students in regular recess is something that the school had already begun implementing at the time of the study, and most recess periods have continued to include more than one grade level.

### **Teachers Perceptions of Let Grow Play Club and Recess**

Our third and final research question is about teachers' perceptions of Let Grow Play Club and recess. Many teachers in the staff meeting and within interviews noted problems with the typical structure of children's play outside of school. In the discussion of recess at the school faculty meeting, teachers mentioned that children were "overscheduled," lacked "unstructured play... where they are just able to play with their friends," and that they are "inside a lot of the time and on devices." In a one-on-one interview, a new fifth grade teacher enthusiastically described the different approach to recess and play at the school:

When I came [to this school], I saw that all these amazing opportunities were being given to the kids...the kids seem very independent, very confident, which is something that I felt I could see lacking in students who didn't have recess or who weren't encouraged to play in school.

Teachers discussed three main benefits to the periods of unstructured play in the school: focus, working cooperatively, and working through problems without adult intervention.

#### *Focus*

All of the teachers interviewed discussed the importance of periods of unstructured play for student focus. According to one kindergarten special education teacher, "I think my kids perform better in the afternoon, after the longer

recess, than in the morning...[a] sustained period of that activity, I think, provides them a longer period of attention when they come back into the room.” Another kindergarten teacher also discussed the increased emphasis on play and the effect on student focus: “I just think that we are now meeting their needs. They need this time to play... They are more focused when they come back and start to get into the academics of their school day.” This topic also came up at the observed staff meeting, where one second grade teacher noted:

For most students, they’re able to focus more during the day because they know a play break is coming, and they can save their socializing and their energy for that time. They look forward to it, and they physically need it. They need to be able to move around.

One of the first grade teachers interviewed discussed a shift in the school, from a standardized-test-centered, rigorous schedule to a schedule that allows more time for kids to play. This teacher excitedly discussed the perceived benefits of this approach for students’ performance in class: “What we’re noticing, the quality is different, and we’re just going deeper into things instead of skimming everything. Those breaks are really letting us dive into academics.” She saw the academic benefits of unstructured play breaks.

The recess breaks in the day were seen as important for focus, but this similarly came up as a benefit of the Friday morning Play Club. One fifth grade teacher said of Play Club:

I just felt like they were ready to start their day. They released something. They had...I don’t know, maybe a release of energy...I just feel like they were calm, and they were really up...ready...for any challenge that I would give to them.

Whether in the middle of the day or the morning, that time of active play was important for students’ attention span in the classroom. All of the interviewed teachers spoke of incorporating breaks throughout the day in addition to their periods of recess, seeing these as necessary to maintain student focus. For example, one first grade teacher stated:

They are actually more present when teaching after the breaks. Whereas if you go for extended times, like those mornings where we’d continue to teach because we don’t want to get interrupted, and to show them the difference, and you can absolutely notice that they are not focusing; they are not able to pay attention as well.

Teachers see longer periods of play—Play Club and recess—as beneficial to student focus, and they are distributing smaller breaks throughout the day amidst instructional time to maintain this focus.

### *Working Cooperatively*

One of many social skills that children learn through play is how to work cooperatively. One kindergarten teacher noted that periods of unstructured play, including both recess and Play Club, were important for social development:

I had one student in the beginning of the year that had a very difficult time interacting with other children. It was almost as if she had never done so before. She was extremely bossy. The other kids really shied away from her, and even adults had commented from just walking by, the way that she spoke to other students. Through Play Club, through recess, through socialization during snack time, lunch time, play breaks...I was just listening to her this morning actually, and I couldn't believe the way that she has matured socially. She was able to communicate with other students in a way that's effective and almost nurturing, when at the beginning, it was just all her needs and how to quickly meet them.

The example illustrates that periods of unstructured play lay the foundation for students to think more cooperatively, rather than just about their own needs.

Working cooperatively can also be seen in children's ability to negotiate games. Five of the six teachers interviewed noted that the longer play periods—40–60 minutes rather than 20 minutes—give students more time to create and negotiate games. As observed by one fifth grade teacher:

I've noticed that if I were to cut down their recess to 20 minutes, I don't feel like it would be as beneficial for them, because it's some time for them to get into their sport and to actually start playing. It is not something that just starts right off the bat. I think longer recess really does help—they being able to socialize, problem solve, and be creative in what they're playing, then adapt their game to meet different hurdles and challenges that they come across while playing.

A kindergarten teacher outlined the history of recess and play within the school, coming to a similar conclusion about the benefits of longer periods of play:

Once Common Core came and the new state standards, it was no more than 20 minutes. And, if you didn't take recess at all, that was kind of more preferential...it was as much work as you could possibly cram into one day, and recess was not considered necessary. Now, they go out for 10 minutes at lunch time which is fantastic, and then they go back to the classroom and have recess for another 40 minutes either outside or inside. And in that time, they're able to establish games; they're able to form relationships; they're able to problem solve.

Longer periods of play are seen by teachers as important for establishing games and problem solving. Our observation data supports these assertions. As noted above, we observed more games during the longer, 60-minute Play Club periods than during the shorter, 40-minute recess periods.

### *Working Through Problems*

Each of the six interviewed teachers also noted the importance of students being given the time and space to work through problems on their own, without adult intervention. Working through problems independently can be seen as both a social and cognitive skill. Teachers repeatedly relay that they think this skill is important and is not being developed in the current (typical) structure of kids play. In the words of one first grade teacher, “Now they have time for those interpersonal skills to be built, because they haven’t had time.” Another first grade teacher stressed that “everything is such a structured play date; your mom has to watch over you when you do it. So, I think we’re trying to give that a little bit more [freedom] in school...it’s a life lesson.” However, teachers do believe that the longer periods of play at school are helping to cultivate these skills. Discussing both Play Club and recess, one teacher at the staff meeting noted:

I think for my kids, it teaches them how to play for once; they really don’t know how to socialize, how to play. I think it offers many opportunities for them to solve problems, without me telling them what they should be doing, when they have the time to figure it out themselves.

The teachers do not believe that students have enough unstructured play at home, but do believe there are benefits to having unstructured play incorporated within the school day. The kindergarten special education teacher perceived clear changes in student problem solving behavior with increased play time:

In the past we only had a 20-minute recess every day. So now with the 40 minutes, it is a lot more time for them to play, and they love it... They have the ability and time to work out their own issues that are happening out there. If someone takes a ball that someone has, you know, waiting his or her turn for something. They have more opportunity now with the longer recess to work through that, and they’re coming to me less and less. Earlier, if somebody had a problem with another child they would come right to me or my aide and say, “He took my ball” and things like that. Now, under modeling, at this point in the year, I see that happening more independently, where they’re using their words to either say how they’re feeling or what they want or, “Can I have it next when you’re done?” I am starting to see that language a little bit more on

the playground. The longer period helps, and also just the availability to play more frequently throughout the day.

Teachers repeatedly relayed that longer periods of play allowed students to work through their own problems, rather than relying on adult intervention. Periods of free play during the school day are resulting in students building community: working through problems independently, developing games, and making friendships—all important skills for students to develop.

## Discussion

This case study highlights the benefits of unstructured play for students and educators in one school, extending an existing line of research on the benefits of recess and play for students in all elementary schools. Teachers and students express cognitive, emotional, and social benefits to play. This study is unique in that the school environment has a relatively recent dedication to unstructured play within schools, allowing for (1) analysis of the newly implemented Let Grow Play Club, and (2) comparisons across different lengths of play periods (e.g., recess vs. Play Club). Our analysis allowed us to answer our research questions. First, patterns of play behaviors emerged during Play Club and recess. Elementary students engaged in active play in 98.9% of the observations, and children invented games during the longer Play Club sessions. These are important findings related to the importance of physical activity for school districts. Exercise improves learning (Jensen, 2005), and running, playing, and climbing before school during Let Grow Play Club and later during recess can help younger students stay focused for longer periods of time (i.e., compensating for cognitive immaturity, Burriss & Burriss, 2011).

Second, students perceived Play Club as helping them to stay focused during school, improve their mood, and to socialize and make new friends. Much of what elementary students do during recess—including making friends, deciding what is fair, and developing rules for games—involves social skills. Students reported changes in their mood after a Let Grow Play Club session, as well as establishing new friends. Research (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014; Jarrett, 2019) shows that when students play together, they learn how to take turns, resolve conflicts, and solve problems. They also learn how to manage their own emotions and behavior, fundamental skills for life. Gray (2011, 2018) also contends that unstructured play helps students regulate emotions, solve problems, and make friends. The playground in a community or elementary school is one of the few places where children can confront, interpret, and learn from meaningful social experiences (Jambor, 1994).

Last, our data from teachers and students suggested that recess and Play Club helped students remain focused with their academic work. The finding that periods of play can improve focus has certainly been described in other literature (e.g., Erwin et al., 2019; Jarrett et al., 1998; Pellegrini et al., 1995). In fact, incorporating unstructured play throughout the day can help to refocus students in between periods of instruction (Dempster, 1988; Koerner, 2019; Rohrer & Taylor, 2006; Rohrer et al., 2005). Consistent with cognitive immaturity theory, kindergarten teachers in this study reported the importance of needing time to play to remain focused in class, form relationships, and problem solve. Play and recess breaks can be an effective way to reduce disruptive behavior for younger students (Pellegrini, 2005; Pellegrini et al., 1995; Yesil-Dagli, 2012).

Our goal was to provide data related to the benefits of unstructured play and recess in elementary schools. Schools have reduced time during the school day for necessary recess breaks (Barros et al., 2009; Roth et al., 2003; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2007), and time allotted to recess may be even less in schools with poorer student populations (Yesil Dagli, 2012). Since periods of play have cognitive, emotional, and social benefits for all students, we must approach expanding play to all students as a social justice issue. According to Rico and Janot (2019), play activities can be tools “for the development and personal growth of the most disadvantaged and most needy” (p.21). Ginsburg et al. (2007) notes that economically disadvantaged students living in unsafe neighborhoods are unlikely to have the same opportunities for child-centered, unstructured play at home. Thus, in disadvantaged communities, advocating for play outside of school may look different and may include such things as expanding quality childcare services, extracurricular opportunities, and community center programs. Much play can also take place within schools, and this may need to be a focus for disadvantaged students. Recess in schools must be preserved and expanded, which means that schools need funding for appropriate play equipment, facilities, and supervision (Ramstetter et al., 2010).

## **Implications**

Implementing Let Grow Play Club or a similar program either before or after school is one way to expand play in any school environment, including in states that have reduced recess or have left recess time up to school boards (Merrigan, 2019). As highlighted above, such additional periods of play were seen as beneficial even in a school with substantial periods of play throughout the school day. Eliminating recess and unstructured play is a mistake; according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013), recess is a “crucial and

necessary component of a child's development" and sacrificing it for more instructional time is counterproductive. When it is safe to do so, perhaps parent-teacher organizations and local colleges that require service learning hours could provide trained volunteers to staff such clubs. This could further expand and strengthen the school community and even increase the number and frequency of unstructured play programs in schools.

Periods of play may be even more important as students work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. We recommend implementing programs like Let Grow Play Club; a before or after school program is a relatively easy solution for any elementary school that wants to increase time allocated for physical activity and unstructured play when schools reopen. Schools and communities could offer outdoor Play Club several days a week for at least 60 minutes per day. Programs could be divided into before school or after school sessions and could limit the number of children in each multiage session. It is important children are engaged in setting expectations and guidelines for health and safety before implementation. A daily Play Club program either before or after school would help ease children back into the school setting when schools reopen and provide a physical outlet for children to calm their stress and help them thrive with their peers and teachers.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While we have documented benefits to recess, this research does have limitations. The data was rich in opinions, views, and perceptions, making this valuable research in terms of better understanding the benefits of unstructured play from the perspectives of students and teachers. However, our research qualitatively assessed these changes only after they were implemented. These findings support previous research related to changes in students' classroom behaviors and academic performance when provided with breaks during the school day (Jarrett et al., 1998; Pellegrini, 2005; Yesil Dagli, 2012). Future research in other schools and communities could quantitatively measure changes in student achievement before and after expansions in recess. Future research may also want to interview parents, qualitatively capturing their thoughts about unstructured play, expansions of recess, or programs such as Let Grow Play Club.

Another limitation is that we interviewed students after Play Club but not after recess periods. A more comprehensive comparison would interview students after each and would explicitly ask students about differences between Play Club and recess. Additionally, researchers were substantially spread out across the large play areas during observation periods; however, during these observations, the possibility is that the most active students were chosen more

than once. Future observation research may seek a more systematic way to select students for observation (e.g., colored or numbered stickers on their shirts) to make sure that the same child is not observed twice.

Further, we did not collect demographic data on the students in Play Club (e.g., race/ethnicity, poverty); thus, even though Play Club participants were randomly chosen by the principal from a list of parental consent forms for each grade level, we do not know how closely their demographics match the demographics of the larger school and recess population. Future research on Play Club, particularly comparative studies, should collect demographic information on participants. Finally, our sample was purposive in one elementary school. Future research could look at the expansion of play and different play/recess programs in a diverse set of schools and communities. The more data we have to support the benefits of play in our schools, the more we can effectively advocate for play as a social justice issue (Ginsburg, 2007; Jarrett, 2019; Rico & Janot, 2019).

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## Appendix B. Letter to Parents About Play Club

Dear Parents/Guardians:

Once again this year, the XXXXX District is fortunate to have the opportunity to continue with Play Clubs this Spring across all of our elementary schools. This club will be for K–5 students and will be held on Friday mornings from 8:15– 9:15 a.m. The club is set to begin on Friday, March 2nd and continue until Friday, May 18th.

Students will be chosen through a lottery conducted by your child’s principal, with an equal sampling of students on each grade level for equity within the program. Students participating in the Play Club will need to be transported to school by their parents in the morning. Students will be dropped off at the gym lobby of school and will be picked up by faculty members who will be leading the club. Each week, students will be playing in a select location; outside, in the gym, play rooms, and the like.

This club will offer our students added time for self-directed, unstructured play outside of the school day. It is the vision of our district to offer children an education which meets the physical, emotional, academic, and social areas of their lives. We are confident that our Play Club will be an additional opportunity to assist our students in each of these areas.

If your child is interested in participating in the club being held at XXXXX school, please fill out the portion below, and return to your child’s teacher by Wednesday, February 7, 2018. Participants will be notified by Friday, February 9, 2018. If you **do not** receive a call by this date, your child will have an opportunity to participate in **future** Play Club opportunities. We realize that there may be high interest in these clubs, and are grateful for your understanding that there will need to be a cap on the number of students for this session.

We look forward to continuing to expand the experiences of our students, and to work with you as partners in education.

Sincerely,

XXXX

Principal

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I give my child, \_\_\_\_\_, permission to participate in the **Spring Session of Play Club at XXXXX Elementary School.**

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

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Parent Signature