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Supporting Student Connectedness and Social Satisfaction During Recess

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Supporting Student Connectedness and Social Satisfaction During Recess

by
Elizabeth Teasdale Wells

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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SUPPORTING STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

This project examines the effects of how recess preparation and reflection can be focused on providing students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen overall happiness. By investigating the role social satisfaction plays in a child's life during recess, educators may gain knowledge about how to foster social connectedness for every child. While most studies about recess focus on a child's level of physical activity or negative behaviors, researchers have yet to investigate recess as a place to improve a child's well-being and social satisfaction. This study was conducted at a public elementary school through qualitative interviews and observations. Teachers, administrators, and yard duty monitors were interviewed, and ninety-five children shared their perspectives by writing in journals during class time.

When a teacher is more aware of what is going on with her students at recess, she is able to fully teach the whole child and better prepare them for the social skills needed to have a successful recess experience. Often teachers are not regularly on the playground to observe recess, so they are unaware of what students are doing or any social conflicts that may arise. Although teachers need the recess break for their own time, there can be classroom time built in daily or weekly for teachers to connect with their student's recess experiences. If a teacher is able to prepare and reflect on recess by utilizing transitions, it will legitimize student feelings that recess is an important time in school.

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This project would not have been possible without the support of many individuals who assisted me in this journey. I would like to thank Jennifer Lucko, Ph.D., through our year together, she taught me how to be a researcher, not only in the field, but also when analyzing the piles of collected data. I would also like to thank Katherine Lewis, Ph.D. for her support in guiding me through the thesis writing process. I am very grateful for her hours of reading and rereading my paper, editing, making suggestions, and giving me advice on all aspects of my finished project, including the numerous contractions.

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Nobody has been more essential to me in the pursuit of this project than the members of my wonderful family! Most importantly, I wish to thank my loving and supportive husband, Alan, and my amazing son, Anthony, who provide unending inspiration and encouragement. I would like to thank my parents, especially my marvelous Mamma, whose love and guidance are with me in whatever I pursue. My parents, in-laws, and our extended family are the ultimate support system, I couldn't have completed this research study without your patience, support, and allowing me time away from home. And most especially, I would like to thank fellow Dominican Alumni Mary Terrill, without whom none of this would be possible!

Introduction

Recess is often an overlooked part of the school day; it is not on the state test and many teachers think of it as a break to make copies while students eat their snack. However, recess is a critical aspect of a child's social development. Many students spend nearly 300 minutes per week on the yard playing and eating. This constitutes about 14% of a student's school day, which could be seen as more than just a break; it is a chance to develop socially. Far from being a trivial aspect of school learning, social connectedness is directly related to a person's ability to have rewarding relationships and successful academic work. Recess is a critical, yet often forgotten, aspect of a child's day. Recess can make or break a student's school experience depending on how they feel about what is offered and who they are playing with.

In this study, I look at the connection between a child's social satisfaction with their recess experience and their general happiness at school. For children who are not enjoying their recess time, it can negatively impact the rest of their day, including their academic work and general satisfaction. Oftentimes, adults view recess as a break without guidance and children are let out onto the playground without planning or preparation for successful interactions with their peers. One possible way to provide children with the tools for a successful recess is by using positive psychology techniques to discuss their recess plans and reflect on their recess experiences. Prior research suggests a positive correlation between regular positive psychology techniques and higher levels of life satisfaction (McCabe, Bray, Kehle, Theodore, & Gebar, 2011). The research of McCabe and contributors (2011) highlighted two interventions used with middle school children. The researchers noted a clear correlation between doing daily or weekly positive psychology techniques and a

heightened level of life satisfaction, even with children as young as age 12. For college students, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that boosting one's sense of social belonging led to better health and more academic success. In a young child's life, recess satisfaction is pivotal for their academic success, so using positive psychology techniques may be a conclusive step toward better health and happiness in the younger age group as well.

In this study, I explore the idea that if younger students have a stronger sense of social belonging and satisfaction, they too could be happier at school. Recess is often viewed as a time for children to independently eat snack and play a game, and adults often leave children to their own devices while supervising from afar. While break time is critical for every student, not every child feels satisfied during recess. With this study, I explore the barriers surrounding recess satisfaction, and aim to better understand why some children feel socially connected during recess.

Understanding what is meant by the term *recess* is critical to reading the research in this study. Recess is a time when children can play, typically on a playground, with limited direction. Although recess is often viewed solely as a time for a mental break, a snack, and some physical exercise, Jarrett (2002) states that recess is critical for academic learning in the classroom and for a child's unstructured social development with peers. On the recess playground, children make choices, develop guidelines for games, and develop social skills while playing with friends in an open setting (Jarrett, 2002). According to Boyle, Marshall, and Robeson (2003) "in its purest form, play connotes a light-heartedness, an abandonment to joy, to spontaneity" (p. 1327). Spontaneous play occurs when there is limited direction, but students cannot have a light-hearted abandonment to joy if they struggle socially or feel disconnected from their peers.

The phrase *social connectedness* is of essential importance as one looks into supporting a child's social satisfaction. Social Connectedness can be defined as a person's relationship to others, including their roles in society. A person's connectedness in society includes the amount of personal connections one has and the quality of those connections (Ministry of New Zealand Social Development, 2005). A child's social roles can include friend, sibling, teammate, student or a myriad of other roles. Social satisfaction is a critical aspect to a happy life, and for children, their satisfaction during recess directly affects the rest of the school day. "Relationships give people support, happiness, contentment and a sense they belong and have a role to play in society" (Ministry of New Zealand Social Development, 2005, p. 114).

While most studies about recess focus on a child's level of physical activity or negative behaviors, researchers have yet to investigate recess as a place to improve a child's well-being and happiness (based on their social satisfaction). With this study, I aim to explore the idea that if younger students have a stronger sense of social belonging, they too could be happier on and off the playground. When students are happier during recess, the rest of their day becomes more successful.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which recess can be utilized to provide students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen happiness. By investigating the role social satisfaction plays in a child's life during recess, educators may gain knowledge about how to foster social satisfaction in other aspects of their school day.

In this paper, I use pseudonyms for all participants in order to protect the children and adults who volunteered their time and knowledge during the data collection process. The school site, identified by the pseudonym Central School for this study, offers numerous

options for children during recess, including gardening club, an indoor game room, the school library, basketball, handball, ga-ga, four square, a multi-tiered structure, and a large field for running around. On most days, there are four adults monitoring the playground for about 250 children. However, despite these many offerings, there are still children who feel unsatisfied at recess. In interviews with the adults monitoring the playground (the yard duty) these children were described as those who are isolated, hiding under the play structure, eating snack alone, disengaged with peers, and not participating in any activity. On the Central School playground, the isolated and disengaged students typically make up less than five to ten children on a given day. These children are not causing major discipline problems, but nonetheless educators and leaders must strive to help every child feel socially connected instead of just monitoring those who are already exhibiting problems. As an educator, it is critical to be proactive in supporting children instead of waiting for the disputes to arise. Just because a child is not showing negative behaviors yet, does not mean they are happy or connected with peers.

The results of this study will be shared with teachers and administrators at several school sites with the goal of developing a system for teachers to practice positive psychology techniques before and after recess with their students on a school-wide level. The results of this study benefit the classroom environment if children come back to class feeling satisfied after their recess experiences.

Every child should have the opportunity to have fun at recess, regardless of background or ability or family or culture, and, as a society, it is our responsibility to determine how to support this goal for every child. Some students struggle to connect socially; if teachers are able to support all learners and abilities in the classroom, they can

also do so on the playground. Although this study was conducted at a large public elementary school in a mostly upper class community, the findings may be applicable to children in a variety of school models or settings.

This study was qualitative in nature. Adults were interviewed, and children shared their perspective by writing in a journal during class time. I conducted interviews of colleagues and chose this topic to study after years of teaching at the school site and struggling to support children who did not feel connected or satisfied during recess. In developing this case study, I collected detailed information, which was gathered through observations and interviews over several months at the same school site.

As the sole researcher, I conducted interviews with recess supervisors, teachers in the 3rd and 4th grades, as well as administrators. Students participated in this study by writing about their views on recess for four consecutive weeks in a row. As the researcher, I worked together with the teachers to create prompts for the students to answer before and after recess. During week one, the purpose of the prompts was determining how socially connected the students felt while on the playground. For weeks two and three, the recess preparation prompts encouraged students to work on a recess plan, such as locating a specific friend or trying a certain activity. The reflection prompt after recess for weeks two and three focused on how their preparation supported their time on the playground. The fourth week's prompt posed similar questions to the first week; the purpose of this fourth prompt was to determine how socially connected the students felt on the playground after working on a written recess plan and reflecting for four weeks.

Once all the data was collected and analyzed, the findings from this research project demonstrate that when students who are struggling socially do not have their teachers

available to support their recess experiences, there are social and emotional consequences for these children. Without the necessary support from adults, students who struggle socially will not develop the skills to strengthen social connections on the playground. In this study, one of the themes that presented itself is the teacher's disconnect from her student's recess experiences. Another theme to arise from the study was the lack of support for student transition time from an academic classroom to the social playground, which should be a time to clearly designate that a change in the child's day is happening and prepare students to switch from academic mode to social mode. The final theme arising from this study is that social connectedness on the playground affects the classroom environment because children are unable to leave a frustrating recess experience behind them without any reflection or discussion. When students are socially connected on the playground they are happier at school and perform stronger in their classroom academics.

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which recess can be utilized to provide students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen happiness. Students in elementary school have daily access to recess and their satisfaction during this time directly affects the rest of their school day. A person's happiness and social connectedness are directly related to successful relationships and academic work. Social connectedness - the sense of having positive relationships - can be affected by a person's outlook on their life, which can be greatly impacted by using positive psychology techniques focusing on a better, happier future. Positive psychology techniques can impact a child's outlook on recess and her overall day at school.

Recess is a time when children can play, typically on a playground, with limited direction. Although recess is often viewed solely as a time for a mental break, a snack, and some physical exercise, Jarrett (2002) points out how recess is critical for learning in the classroom and for a child's unstructured social development with peers.

The average time allocated for recess around the United States is 30.2 minutes per day, according to the Center for Disease Control (2006). The school involved in this study allows all children (in Kindergarten through fourth grade) to have 280 total minutes of recess time per week, which is broken into a 20-minute break in the morning and another 45 minutes in the afternoon on a typical school day.

Although recess is often considered the highlight of the school day for most elementary school students, it can be a time of social anxiety and conflicts for some children. For these children, recess is not a time filled with play but rather a time of isolation or unhappiness. Typical barriers for a successful recess include limitations with physical play space, inclimate weather, and, most commonly, students' own social conflicts (Pawlowski,

Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Schipperijn, & Troelsen, 2014; see also Stanley, Boshoff, & Dollman, 2012).

This review of literature is organized into four sections: the relationship between happiness on the playground and academic success, positive psychology techniques and satisfaction in society, gender differences at recess, and the various barriers to a successful recess.

The Relationship Between Happiness on the Playground and Academic Success

Happiness and social connectedness are directly related to successful relationships and academic schoolwork (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Social Connectedness can be defined as a person's relationship to others, including their roles in society. A person's connectedness in society includes the amount of personal connections one has and the quality of those connections. A child's social role can include friend, sibling, teammate, student or a myriad of other roles. Social satisfaction is a critical aspect to a happy life, and a child's satisfaction during recess time directly affects the rest of his school day.

In a study done with college students over a three-year period, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that boosting a sense of social belonging led to better health and academic success. These researchers, Walton and Cohen (2011), found that using a targeted social intervention for incoming freshman led to a stronger connection to their school community and more satisfaction in life. Their intervention included using the "saying is believing effect" (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1448) on college freshman. Each student was asked to write an essay on adversity; the students were told their essays would be viewed by future freshman. The study encouraged the idea that adversity is not unique to one person or one race, but to all students going through a big adjustment. This thought experiment helped all

students feel more connected with each other because nobody felt isolated. Although Walton and Cohen's work was done with college students, the same concepts may benefit younger children who feel they are going through a hard time, such as adversity or isolation on the playground.

In a study with middle school students, Battistich, Victor, Schaps, Eric, and Wilson (2004) determined that students who participated in the "Child Development Project" had a higher likelihood of being less anti-social and experiencing more academic success. The "Child Development Project" (CDP) was a whole-school intervention in which the goal was to foster a community of caring learners. This project involved three critical aspects of a child's life: their classroom, the whole school, and their family's involvement. CDP was unique in its approach because it focused on the promotion of positive development among children as opposed to many other programs that focused on preventing problems with those already at risk. CDP focused on helping students make choices to work toward a more positive future instead of reprimanding their problems from the past. The program involved intensive work in the classroom, including collaborative learning and classroom management techniques that emphasized personal responsibility and self-control for all students. The students who completed this program reported being more connected to their schools, which included liking school more, trusting and respecting teachers, working harder, more engagement in their classes, and having a stronger sense of school community. These characteristics play a role in helping students feel more included on and off the playground.

A study by Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton (2006) focused on the levels of competition on the middle school playground and how competition relates to school satisfaction. Loukas and others (2006) explained that competition was correlated with higher tension between

students, as well as overall lack of satisfaction at school. Their findings contribute to the idea that a positive school environment directly affects student conduct and behavior problems. Depending on the student, competition can be either a motivator or a barrier to success and satisfaction, but this study found competition to be more of a hindrance.

Positive Psychology Techniques and Satisfaction in Society

According to some researchers (McCabe, Bray, Kehle, Theodore, and Gebar, 2011), there is a strong correlation between regular positive psychology techniques and higher levels of satisfaction with life. Positive psychology is an attitude that focuses on making choices to live a better future instead of other psychologies that may analyze the past. According to McCabe and contributors (2011), “Positive feelings are linked to an increase in both competency and resilience in children and a child’s own social and emotional resources help him or her to negotiate the environment” (pg. 179). Techniques of positive psychology include gratitude journals, physical exercise, and meditation; these routines may positively impact a child’s outlook on recess and her day at school.

Prior research suggests a positive correlation between regular positive psychology techniques and higher levels of life satisfaction (McCabe, et al., 2011). The article by McCabe, et al., (2011) highlighted the link between using positive psychology techniques, such as the “Gratitude Letter” and “Three Good Things in Life,” to increase happiness and foster better emotional competence and overall benefits in adolescents. They found a positive correlation between completing daily or weekly positive psychology techniques and a heightened level of life satisfaction. Schools have the ability to positively affect a child’s satisfaction in life by highlighting the importance of gratitude starting at a young age.

Fordyce (1977) suggested that “the achievement of happiness is one of the most important goals of humankind” (p. 511).

With happiness being of critical importance and social connectedness playing a large role in one's level of happiness, it is important to note what the other side of being happy can do to a person. According to Seligson, Huebner, and Valois (2004), “individuals with decreased levels of life satisfaction are at a higher risk for a widened spectrum of both psychological and social problems such as depression, anxiety, and poor social interactions” (pg 356).

In a project with an urban school that had high gang violence, Butcher (1999) implemented an intervention program that focused on correcting negative behaviors during recess. Several adults trained in positive interactions and interventions provided guided opportunities to work on social skills while playing games with students. The researchers not only worked directly with the children on social interactions, but also observed their behaviors on the playground. The methods used by these researchers were techniques of positive psychology, focusing on the positives of life by connecting with one's community for a better future. This intervention was successful at reducing negative incidents at recess, but was more successful with boys than girls.

Gender Differences at Recess

Recess provides different outlets for children based on gender, interests, temperament, and activity level. Starting at a young age, boys and girls interact with the playground differently.

Research has shown that boys tend to have a wider range of activities to choose from at recess, compared to girls (Twarek & George, 1994). When over 400 children were asked

“What is your favorite thing to do at recess?” there were clear differences between the girls and boys. Girls chose passive, non-competitive, small-group activities while boys chose aggressive, competitive, larger-group activities. Girls tended to have more limited choices and boys were offered a wider range of activities to choose from. If girls feel they have less options available to them during recess, the restriction in choice not only limits their answers to a general question (i.e., “What is your favorite thing to do at recess?”) but also limits their possibilities to seek satisfaction in their play. Boys who prefer the passive, non-competitive, small-group activities may feel the same limitations for social connectedness as girls if most of their recess offerings are geared toward competitive, larger-group activities.

According to a study which observed numerous recess times, the researcher determined that girls at recess tend to “walk and talk” while boys are typically active players in sports games (Boyle, Marshall, & Robeson, 2003). Although there are some girls who participate in athletics and boys who choose to do “girl things,” the majority of children played within the aforementioned gender boundaries. Boyle, et al. (2003) also found that adults play a larger role in shaping recess through their interactions with the children; Recess monitors tend to speak to the boys about discipline concerns, but the monitors interact more casually with girls on the playground. Male monitors were observed playing with the children, but the female monitors tended to be bystanders. Boyle, et al. (2003) specifically noted that recess was observed because it is a time when children have greater freedom to take part in various social interactions away from the more adult-directed indoor world.

One study (Boyle, Marshall, and Robeson, 2003) involving the observation of adult recess monitors opened up an interesting perspective into another factor of recess satisfaction for children. If a child has a favorite monitor who positively interacts with them, they will

likely experience heightened satisfaction during recess. However, if an adult monitor constantly disciplines or corrects a child, they may have a negative recess experience. There are many factors that play a role in each child's recess satisfaction!

The Various Barriers to Successful Recess

Although recess is often a time when children feel happy and play with their friends, even the most capable students can run into barriers related to the location, the community, or the weather.

According to research by Stanley, et al. (2012), the top reason children reported not fully participating in physical activity during recess is because of “lack of access to space” (p. 3). Lacking the access to space could refer to instances where the space is currently being occupied by other children or may speak to the condition of the materials in the space.

Another reason children reported not fully participating during recess was related to weather conditions; sometimes, it was too hot or too wet. Their school uniforms also played a factor in which activities children took part in. For example, the girls said their uniform skirts were a restriction to playing games like kickball.

In a study of fourth-graders from Denmark, researchers found similar barriers to participating during recess, with the main barrier being the weather conditions (Pawlowski, et al., 2014). Other complications from the student's perspective included social conflicts, lack of space, and lack of play facilities and use of electronic devices. Interestingly, both girls and boys shared the same barriers, but in different ways. For example, the weather was an issue for all children except the very active boys who wanted to participate in sports regardless of the weather. Both girls and boys identified conflicts and space issues as

barriers to participating during recess; however, girls requested more private hang-out spaces whereas boys requested larger play areas.

Not all barriers are tied to a school's location or the unpredictable weather. Qualter (2003) focused his study on children who feel lonely at school. In order to better support lonely children, Qualter suggested limiting competition on the playground as well as encouraging cooperative learning groups and facilitating friendships within the classroom. Qualter also encouraged self-reflection to support all children, but especially those who feel isolated. Self-reflection within a classroom can be an opportunity to see that sometimes other children feel lonely too, thus reducing feelings of isolation for some children.

Along with feeling lonely at school, some children are naturally shy and can become anxious on the playground. Findlay, Coplan, and Bowker (2009) discovered that children who self-reported as being withdrawn often had greater dissatisfaction with peers, athletics, and a lower overall self-concept. Shyness is directly related to loneliness and anxiety and Findlay and others (2009) stated that shyness can be more detrimental for boys than girls. These researchers concluded that shy children often lack coping skills, which can lead to negative outcomes related to their shyness.

While most studies about recess focus on a child's level of physical activity or negative behaviors, researchers have yet to investigate recess as a place to improve a child's well-being and happiness based on their social satisfaction. With this study, I explore the idea that helping younger students develop a stronger sense of social belonging will lead to increased happiness for all students on and off the playground. When students are happier during recess, they are most likely to feel happier throughout the rest of their day.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which recess can be utilized to provide students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen happiness. By investigating the role that social satisfaction plays during a child's recess time, we may be able to foster success in other aspects of their school day.

Methods

This project examines the effects of how recess preparation and reflection can be focused on providing students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen overall happiness. The study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Why do some children feel more socially connected during recess, and how does this affect their day? (2) What do children say makes them most happy during recess? (3) What factors affect a child's smooth transition from recess to their classroom? (4) What are the barriers that prevent children from enjoying their recess time? (5) How does the ability to socially connect at recess affect students immediately after recess in the classroom?

Description of Research Approach

For this study, I used a qualitative research approach to collect data from professionals at Central School. Qualitative research approaches the exploration of understanding a human problem and focusing on the importance of representing the complexity in a situation (Creswell, 2014). In order to explore the social situation at recess, I interviewed teachers and yard duty supervisors and administrators. I also collected student work samples from ninety-five student writing journals.

This study is based on the phenomenological research design approach in which a researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals centering around a phenomenon. The approach involves using multiple stages of data collection, such as interviews (Creswell, 2014). As the primary researcher, I attempted to better understand the situation of recess at Central School by exploring various perspectives and perceptions from adults and children at the school. After years of teaching at the school site and struggling to support children who did not feel connected or satisfied during recess, I chose to explore this topic and conducted

interviews with my colleagues. For this case study, I collected detailed information that was gathered through observations and interviews over several months at the same school site.

In order to protect all participants, the data was kept confidential and all participation was optional. The professionals who chose to participate shared their experiences and bias and offered suggestions as a part of the interview process. All names and references used in this report are pseudonyms.

Research Design

Currently, there are six hundred fifty-nine students attending Central School in California in grades Kindergarten through fourth. Each grade level has about one hundred and thirty children split between either five or six classrooms. This school is located in an upper class neighborhood with mostly European American families, about sixty-seven percent of the students are White. Less than six percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and accepting free or reduced lunches. There is about nine percent of the population receiving English Language Learning services.

As a child, I was a student at Central School and later, as an adult, I was a second grade teacher at the school for four years. I have the experience of being a part of the Central School community as both a child and an adult spanning many years of changes in not only the buildings, but the staff, and the educational philosophies of the district. I am not currently a teacher in the district, but I continue to stay strongly connected with the school by participating in school-wide activities to support my previous students and my colleagues. In this study, I interviewed and observed four colleagues, three yard duty teachers, and two administrators.

Teachers, yard duty supervisors, and administrators were asked to participate in an optional interview. I recruited participants by emailing all third and fourth grade teachers and yard duty personnel announcing that interested volunteers should contact me to arrange an interview. The administrators were also contacted to collect different data sources for a triangulated approach.

Participants of this study (teachers, administrators, and yard duty supervisors) participated in a 20-minute interview that consisted of open-ended questions. Interviews occurred at a time, date, and location mutually agreed upon by the interviewer and interviewee. Notes were taken of the interview, but did not include any identifying information (i.e., address, phone number, last name) other than the participant's first initial and gender.

Classroom teachers who choose to participate in the study had the option of including journal prompts into their existing classroom journaling routine that focused on recess experiences. I created the journal prompts in collaboration with the classroom teachers using the theories of positive psychology techniques as a guiding force. Journaling is an established instructional strategy in the classrooms at Central School and did not require any change or modification to their existing classroom structure. All journal prompts related to a child's recess experiences, hopes, and frustrations. All journal entries shared with me were completely anonymous, including only the student's first initial and gender. At Central School, student journal writing connected to instructional practices are regularly shared between teachers to discuss ways to improve classroom pedagogy. Therefore, using student journal entries as a component of this study was a normal educational practice for the students and teachers.

For the teachers who choose to include the prompts into their regular journaling routine, their students had the option to write in their journals before and after recess once a week for four consecutive weeks. Due to the strong correlation between regular positive psychology techniques and higher levels of satisfaction with life, positive psychology was an influencer in creating our journal prompts. During the first week, students were asked questions relating to their recess experiences and thoughts. The second and third weeks involved the option for students to create a recess plan with an emphasis on positive thoughts and social satisfaction. The fourth week was a review of how they felt about recess after they had time to focus on viewing this part of their day as more than just a break for snack and exercise. No student names were recorded on journal entries. The school principal supported the use of student journals in this project to analyze the impact of normal educational practices.

Researcher Positionality

I was a teacher in the Central School district for four years and implemented several methods at the school to boost social connectedness, such as the “Buddy Bench” and monthly school-wide character counts read-alouds. The data was interpreted through the lens of a teacher who is passionate about helping every student feel connected, especially those who do not call attention to themselves, the “wall flowers.”

Despite the idea that “backyard research” can lead to compromises and balance of power concerns between inquirers and participants, the researcher took many steps to protect those participants who volunteered to take part in this study. The idea of doing a study in one's “backyard” may provide a potential for concerns with personal bias and tight connections to the setting, but the opposite side of that argument is that a researcher spending

extra time in her own community gives validity to the data (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2014), a researcher develops an in-depth understanding of participants by spending prolonged time in the field, and the more experience a researcher gains the more accurate or valid their findings will be.

Because I, the primary researcher, had previous experiences working at the school site and participating during recess activities, this study stems from personal knowledge and motivated me to find the most accurate interpretations of the data. I believe that recess is a critical component of a child's school day, and when a child is socially happy, they are more connected to their community and produce better academic work. While observing on the playground and conducting interviews, I attempted to search for only the most accurate data that would benefit the school; by acknowledging my personal bias, I could identify alternative perspectives that fully represented the viewpoints of the school community. In recognizing multiple perspectives with viewpoints that varied from my own, I was able to produce stronger results, which have the potential to better support all of the students at Central School.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative study, data was collected through interviews of teachers, administrators, and yard duty professionals at Central School. Other forms of data included observations of third and fourth grade children participating in recess as well as in their classrooms before and after recess. The classroom teachers used journal prompts to guide student journal writing, and I was able to observe this process and collect the student journals. The collected data was organized and analyzed using handwritten coding and follow-up conversations with the participants.

The coding process involved reading, underlining, re-reading, comparing, and again re-reading the interviews and student journals. Coding is a process; it “is about data retention, rather than data reduction” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 126). There are many stages in the coding process, including identifying and labeling information from the various data sources as well as refining and interpreting the data (Bazeley, 2013).

I used coding by looking for short phrases that lumped overarching themes and smaller sections to use for later discussions and larger connections. Several of the codes that I came up with were applied to larger chunks of data, such as small passages or longer responses to the interview questions. In reviewing the interviews, I was focused directly on what the interviewee said in response to my questions and later compared the data to the other interviews I conducted. However, in coding the student journals, I was working with comparing information from ninety-five students; not only was I decoding their imaginative spelling, but also coding their thoughts and comparing their answers for the eight journal writing sessions in each classroom. The process of coding the recess observations included reflections of what I noticed and comparing what I noted with what the students and adults reported in their journals and interviews.

Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of this study can be tested through various aspects. First, I triangulated different data sources by interviewing yard duty supervisors, classroom teachers, and administrators, as well as collecting student work samples.

Second, having a strong understanding of the school site gave me reliability as a researcher. I know the community of teachers as well as many of the students, so participants trusted me with their knowledge and offered their time. The study involved

spending time on the campus during the school day, observing the children, and interviewing yard duty and teachers. I also spent four years as a teacher at the school site and know the routines and student population well. I was once a student at this school and have positive relationships with my colleagues as co-workers, friends, and some as previous teachers.

Third, presenting negative information that runs counter to the main themes of the study increases reliability because real life is composed of differing perspectives. My own personal bias is that recess support could only benefit the students; however, in this study, I pursued only the most accurate data that fully represented the numerous viewpoints of the school community. In recognizing multiple perspectives, I was able to produce stronger results which have the potential to better support all students. For example, one alternative perspective that I was aware of is that recess should be just a time to run around without guidance. It might be the perfect time for students to discover themselves without the pressure of adults always guiding them or pushing them to try something new or different.

Findings

Walking out onto the playground with 250 children running and playing and dancing and chatting can look like total chaos. The sun shines down as a group of boys play basketball, running up and down the court yelling to each other; in another section of the playground, six girls huddle together sharing their snacks and stories about their favorite TV characters; over on the play structure, there are games of tag under and around the climbing area while friends make a train, hooked together, sliding down the slide. Most of the third and fourth graders at Central School are participating in their favorite school activity: socializing at recess. However, for the small handful of children who are unsure of life out on the playground, this time of unstructured socializing can be stressful and unsuccessful. Their break from academics turns into an unwelcome challenge.

When a child feels unhappy at recess, or has a negative experience due to a disagreement, their entire day can be affected. It is hard to get back into reading or writing in the classroom when you are nine years old and feeling isolated. Out on the playground, if the problem is not large enough to cause a physical altercation or tears, often the adults who take care of these children are unaware there is even a problem. The child's teachers might be so disconnected from these recess experiences, that they assume everything is fine because they do not hear otherwise. The teacher disconnect from recess has a serious impact on students who are struggling socially.

The findings from this research project demonstrate that, when students who are struggling socially do not have their teachers available to support their recess experience, there are social and emotional consequences for these children. Three major themes emerged to support the theory that teacher disconnect to recess is not a problem to be brushed aside. During the process of interviewing adults, observing recess, and reading student journals, I

concluded, first, that the *Teacher-Recess Disconnect* is a barrier to students being supported while on the playground. Second, *Supporting Student Transition Time* will clearly designate that a change in the child's day is happening and prepare students to switch from academic mode to social mode. The final theme arising from this study is *Social Connectedness on the Playground Affects the Classroom Environment* because children are unable to leave a frustrating recess experience behind them without reflection or discussion.

The Teacher-Recess Disconnect

Teachers are not regularly on the playground for recess, so they are unaware of what their students are doing or any issues that may arise. A third grade teacher shared her thoughts:

I don't know too much about their lives out at recess. I don't know if that's different than like the lower grades, we're just not out there [on the playground] so, I don't know. I don't feel like I know that much about what they are doing or if the [teacher organized partner] pairing up works, I mean they don't come back to me and say that it didn't, so I assumed it was okay. I try to assume the best every day, but we are out to recess every other Wednesday and like I don't even see my students.

Another teacher shared that her students:

Don't usually have a lot of problems at recess that they come to me for. They might go to {the counselor} or {vice principal} or the yard duty. It might be that someone should be nice to them or not letting them play in the game, things like that, but they don't come to me about it.

Teachers at Central School are only on the playground for yard duty once or twice a month; otherwise, it is teacher's aides who may not work in the same classroom with the students who report any problems back to the lead teacher. If a huge problem arises and the office is involved, there is a circle of communication back to the teacher, however social isolation or dissatisfaction is not typically a problem communicated with the office. The yard duty teachers that I interviewed shared experiences of helping students who were having a challenging day socially, but none of them reported sharing that information with the classroom teacher, or even the school office. According to the data collected for this study, issues commonly reported to the office include: bullying, fighting, or physical injuries, not social frustration.

The goal of recess time might be fun and games for most of the elementary school students, but the teachers use this precious time for a very different purpose. During my observation time, I noted that, once the bell rings and the students are safely outside in the care of others, the teachers at Central School only have about fifteen minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the afternoon to take care of any needs that could arise between the hours of 8am and 3pm, while the students are in their care. Those needs include personal necessities such as using the bathroom or finding something to eat, but it also includes preparation for lessons or activities that cannot happen while also teaching a room of twenty-five children. The recess time is also a much needed break for teachers who instruct, guide, and monitor children for nearly seven hours each day.

One of the third grade teachers told me: "It's like I have to have the break, I can't be in here [the classroom]. I need to speak with other adults." Aside from taking a much needed break after being in front of a room full of students for two hours, having common

break time during recess to speak with other adults is critical for improving instruction in the classroom. Another third grade teacher reported that she uses the time to “check in with other staff members about certain kids,” such as those with an Individualized Education Plan, or students who have specialized instruction through the school’s learning lab.

According to The Time for Teachers (2015) report, on average, teachers are contracted to engage in direct classroom instruction nearly 31 hours a week, but are only paid on average for less than 38 hours each week. After factoring in a daily lunch break and routine meetings, there is very little time left for teachers to prepare for lessons or collaborate with peers. This conventional schedule, which is similar to that at Central School and most others around the United States, does not allow teachers the time needed to improve instruction, which is why a daily recess break is so critical to their teaching practice. However, because teachers need, and deserve, this prep time, they cannot also be on the playground connecting with their students during recess.

Outside of needing this time to connect with other adults, all of the teachers interviewed reported using the time to check their work email, which is a critical tool not only for communicating with colleagues, but also for connecting with parents. By using this time to “read and answer emails,” the teachers are able to quickly let parents know if something has gone well, if a task was challenging, or discover a note to pass on to a child, such as if their after school plans have changed unexpectedly.

Regardless of what a teacher chooses to do during this time, having the break from the students is a necessary part of being a better teacher. A fourth grade teacher reported to me: “I’m mostly in my room getting work done that doesn’t get done during the day when the kids are in the room.” Getting any type of work done (such as grading papers or preparing

assignments) in the classroom when students are present is a challenge for teachers and takes away from critical instructional time, so these teachers must make the best of their spare minutes each day!

During my classroom observations and through my teacher interviews, I heard that many teachers at Central School take extra time to create lessons that engage students in new and interesting ways. The third and fourth grade teachers told me about their Maker project that combines art lessons with technology to build a school mural of found object art, I also learned about a design project developing an imaginary mission based on what students learned during their California mission studies. Each and every lesson takes time to prepare before teaching; however, sometimes the most hands-on, captivating lessons take the most time to arrange. Some of the best learning activities take as much time to coordinate as they do to actually teach in the classroom and although these lessons cannot happen every day, they cannot happen at all if teachers do not have the time to prepare for them.

Aside from the numerous items mentioned above, here is a list of some other tasks that teachers reported accomplishing during recess: helping a child with unfinished work, checking in with students about any behavior concerns, checking in with personal child care or the teacher's family, dropping something off in the office, visiting with colleagues, making copies, taking a mental break to check a personal social media accounts, pumping for a breastfed baby, going to the bathroom, or sitting down for a moment. Most of these tasks are not something that can be accomplished with a room full of students, which is why teachers benefit from having recess time as a break.

The teacher's need for this break time gives them a boost in academic planning and supports their students in the classroom, however this leads to the teacher's disconnect from

recess. Teaching the whole child is about more than their reading or writing scores, and because teachers cannot be present on the playground, they are disconnected to what is actually happening with their students. An administrator shared with me that some teachers report watching recess through the window as they prepare materials, but her belief is that viewing an interaction through a window does not give you accurate context. A teacher cannot possibly know what was said or how her students are feeling without being there or asking them. As classroom teachers, we need to reconsider what we think we know about recess compared to what is actually happening with our students; until then, there will be teachers who are disconnected from her student's recess experiences.

Supporting Student Transition Time

Students are quietly reading and chatting with a partner, then the bell rings. BRRRIING! They go back to their tables, clean up their work area, stand up quietly while pushing in their chairs, and then wait to be let outside for their recess. Although students move quickly from their reading so they can rush outside to play, thereby demonstrating to their teacher how much they want to be running around, they are not thinking of how to shift their minds from academic time to social time.

While on the playground, students eat their snack, they run around, play sports or chat with friends, and are mostly engaged in whatever their recess choice is for the day. Then the bell rings. BRRRIING! They clean up their playground materials, rush back to their classroom, line up quietly outside, and then wait to be let into the classroom. Once inside, they find their seat and get started on the next lesson. Students move quickly from their social time back into the quiet academic world of their classrooms.

This is what I observed over and over again in the classrooms I visited. Academic work, then recess play, and then quickly back to academic work. By third and fourth grade, many students are familiar with this routine. Students know what that bell means, and they respond accordingly. However, not all students are able to switch back and forth seamlessly, they struggle to transition from the two different worlds: the structured, academic classroom and the wild, noisy recess.

When asked what they do in the classroom before recess, leading up to the transition, the third and fourth grade teachers that I interviewed shared very similar stories. According to one third grade teacher:

If they hear the bell they know that they can't be dismissed until I give the signals.

Usually we're transitioning usually from either math or writing, then ask them to put their things away and they go back to their seats. Then they walk outside and start to eat their snack first and then go play.

Students in each of the classrooms that I visited know the routine and what the bell means, another third grade teacher stated:

Usually we finish up whatever we're doing, I ask them to give me front row seats which is like turning their chairs to the front of the room and facing me. They either line up for lunch or to go get their snack and then they just go.

In the third and fourth grades, students are considered old enough to walk themselves out to the recess playground, once they have been dismissed by their teacher. Some classrooms have more intricate routines of dismissing children, and others are more straightforward. A fourth grade teacher shared with me that sometimes she dismisses students using exit tickets, an academic task that provides feedback to the teacher about the

lesson and what students just learned. Other times the same teacher dismisses her students by group table points, and still other days she just asks them to clean up and walk outside. In another fourth grade classroom, routines are more regular day to day, the teachers reported: “We just put away everything that we were doing, then they have to make sure their desk is clear, they push in their chairs and then they stand behind their push in chairs and I’ll excuse them.”

In each of the classrooms that I spent time in, not one teacher that I spoke with shared that they spend any time for transitions that involve more than just cleaning up and going outside to play in one way or another. And although their routines may vary slightly between classrooms, the emphasis is clearly not on transitions from academic to social, or preparing students to go out to the playground.

Teachers were also asked what they do in the moments following recess, and they each shared a similar transition to what happens before the recess bell rings. In each classroom, the students hear the bell as they are playing with their friends and then they make their way back to their classrooms. Third and fourth grade students are expected to line up quietly in front of their classroom until the teacher opens the door to begin instruction. One third grade teacher told me:

[After the bell rings], they come to the classroom and then I come and I open the door, I tell them either I need you to sit at your desks or sit on the carpet facing the rocking chair, do that quietly. And then they come in and usually it’s math, so we get right into it.

In each of the classrooms the routines were similar, students quietly lining up and getting ready for more academic time. A fourth grade teacher said in her room:

The students line up outside and most the time, but it kind of depends, but sometimes I'll give them some type of instruction like come in, go to your desk and be ready.

Have your pencils out, then I try to always do reading.

Some teachers ask their students to come in quietly and then academic instruction is given once the students are inside; others set students up for academic work before they even open the classroom door. One teacher told me: "I explain to them outside when I have their attention what they need on their desks for the next activity. Then they go jump into like whatever that could have academic content, after recess sometimes reading or writing."

Despite the grade level or the classroom environment, the goal after recess seems to be the same: get students inside and working as soon as possible. Some teachers allow a few moments for students to transition from their recess activities (for example, giving them time to clean-up their materials on the playground) such as this fourth grade teacher who shared that she tries to wait a minute:

After recess they typically line up by this railing right here just outside the classroom. And then I am there usually right when the bell rings and so I will wait about a minute or two until I can see some stragglers that were putting a ball away and getting their ball card. Generally, we come to the carpet first and then I'll start our Reading Workshop lesson, or occasional have them go to their seats to get their Reader's Notebook.

At Central School, the teachers try to support children who come to them with issues from the recess playground, but without a designated time or place to reflect on student experiences, they can be caught off guard and need to distract the rest of the students while they deal with a problem. A third grade teacher shared that "sometimes there's something

going on, sometimes they will tell me like ‘this happened’ and my first response is kind of like ‘did you tell somebody’ I don't feel like I should do more if it's something the yard duty already knows about. And sometimes things happen like I can usually handle if it's within my own class and they come talk to me. If it's more serious and involves somebody else, then I will send them to the office. [Usually the conflicts are] like ‘he wasn't throwing to me at football and it was on purpose,’ most of the time it is ‘this person was chasing me, and I didn't like it’ or ‘this person wasn't fair.’” The whole situation had to be dealt with as the teacher is also trying to monitor the rest of her students, usually giving them busy work so she can focus on the impromptu problem.

Transitions for students happen many times throughout their school day, from inside to outside, from one teacher to the next, and from one academic subject to another. Many times, these transitions for students are smooth and successful, however when a transition does not go well, it can disrupt the entire class along with the upcoming lesson. Highlighting transitions and supporting students through the shift in their day can easily be built into a regular classroom routine; in this study the journaling time was used to support the transition and allow students time to prepare and reflect for their recess experiences.

One day, while I was observing the journaling activity after recess in a third grade classroom, a child approached his teacher with a concern. Because the journal writing prompts were already on the board, and after three weeks the students knew the reflection transition routine, she was able to quickly start the class on their ten minutes of journal reflections while having time to have a meaningful conversation with her student and the two others involved in the conflict. Within the ten minutes after recess, all of her students shared their thoughts in their journals and her student who asked for help was able to receive what

he needed without disrupting the rest of the students. Every child was able transition smoothly from anything that happened on the playground into their math lesson about adding fractions. They appeared to be supported and acknowledged and ready to tackle their academic content for the day.

If there is a time built into the classroom routine to prepare for and reflect on a child's recess experiences, the teachers become more connected to the concerns of their students. This structured transition time can support children both on the playground and in the classroom.

Social Connectedness on the Playground Affects the Classroom Environment

Sometimes, even for the most social and popular students, recess does not go well. Friends get into disagreements, a team loses a game, a special snack gets snatched up by a seagull, or a best friend plays with somebody else. Any number of things could turn recess into a frustrating moment. When recess does not go well, this let-down can greatly affect the rest of a child's day.

During my playground observations, I mostly observed happy children running around chasing balls and teammates, sitting and snacking in the sunshine, and those involved in imaginative games that I could not keep track of, even though I tried. Overall, the children of Central School were participating in gender normative play; the girls often chose to walk and talk while the boys often participated in the competitive, larger-group activities. In general, children were cheerful and kind and enjoying their recess time, whatever their selected activity may be. However, sometimes a shift would happen during a conversation or in the midst of a game: somebody would get up and walk away or stomp off to the corner of the court, or slowly stop playing and sit on their own. One day, I observed a normally

cheerful and social third grader sitting on her own, despite having watched her rush into a group of friends a few minutes earlier. After some silence with nobody approaching her, I walked over to check in and she started crying. During an imaginative game with her friend, who was her enemy during the game, the boy had said something really hurtful. She knew that it was his role in the game, but it made her feel sad and resentful. Thinking they were still playing, her friend ignored her as did the others in the group. Nobody was aware that she was having a really rough time during recess, and she did not go tell an adult or call attention to herself to ask for help. Although this small moment in time might seem trivial to others around the playground, her tears indicate how hurtful this experience was. After the traumatic recess incident, she was not in the best mindset to return to the academic world of her classroom. In that moment, she felt socially disconnected from her peers.

Most students wrote that friendships are a key component to their recess experience; it is more important than eating snack or any chosen activity. In the student journals, every student I worked with, all ninety-five, wrote about friendships, whether the writing prompt encouraged that discussion or not. Social satisfaction is an integral aspect to a child's recess. One third grade boy wrote: "Friends are important to a good recess because if you don't have any friends, then you will have no one to play with." After recess one day, a fourth grade girl reflected: "Friends are VERY important to have at recess. If you didn't have friends, you wouldn't have anybody to talk with." If we expect our students to be playing, then we need to support them socially to have somebody to play with. Just as having friends on the playground is critical to most students, having a positive recess experience is critical to doing well in the classroom. Students reported that their interactions with friends during recess directly affect their day, including how well they can focus on their schoolwork.

When coming up with the writing prompts and reflections, I used the concepts in positive psychology to support students in writing a recess plan and focusing their thoughts on the positive aspects of recess. By using these positive psychology techniques, students were put in a positive mindset before going outside for recess and also given time to reflect on the great things that happened outside. Most often, the student's writing before recess was very upbeat and, as one fourth grader wrote, she could hardly wait to see her friends who she had not talked to since the day before, it had been nearly twenty whole hours! However, the student reflections after recess were not always as positive as those before; sometimes social problems arose that could not be predicted or planned for, such as arguments.

Students reported in their journal writing that their second largest frustration with recess is when social problems arise, such as fighting with friends (Their first largest frustration was that recess is generally too short, but that's a concern for another day.). In a child's world, having an issue with their social network can consume the whole day; for example, somebody cutting them in line can be a reason to throw up their hands in defeat. Now, put that into a world of two-hundred-fifty children running around on the playground, balls bouncing and flying in numerous directions, and most games requiring a line to participate. When children walk outside for recess and are bombarded with social concerns, they will have a negative recess ordeal which, just like somebody cutting them in line, could make them throw up their hands in defeat for the rest of the school day.

Many students do not have social time in their academic classrooms, their social network is built and strengthened on the playground. The academic rigor in our elementary school classrooms seems to grow each time new standards come about, and the latest adoption is not any different. Although the Common Core Standards encourage

collaboration within the classroom, that is not something that comes naturally to each teacher and so many students find themselves with limited social interactions within their classroom walls. If a child is not taught the skills needed to transition from a quiet working classroom out onto the busy loud playground, they would not have the scaffolding to feel successful as they try and build a social network in a mostly unsupported environment. Similar to how students are taught to work well in partnerships or teams, they can be taught to work well with peers on the playground. In their journals, students wrote that a lack of interactions with friends during recess directly affects their school day, including their return to the academic classroom.

In a large school such as Central School, with five or more classes per grade, the students are often placed in classrooms away from their friends and depend on recess time to connect with their buddies. If a student's main friends are on a field trip or sick, it can make recess challenging. In his writing journal, a fourth grade boy reported "I think friends are important to having a good recess. Today most of my friends were on a field trip and I didn't know what to play." At Central School, there is a Buddy Bench where students can sit and look for other students who might like to play. When I observed the recess playground, I watched several students walk over to the bench looking sad but, after a few moments, another child would skip over and ask them to play. This system works well for children who are brave enough to use it and put themselves in a position to ask for help. An administrator at Central School shared that, although the Buddy Bench is popular with the younger students as a safe place to seek new playground buddies, for the older children it can become a meeting place for friends after eating. She continued to tell me that "the kid that's really socially anxious isn't going to connect with another kid because it actually really

scares him,” so putting himself on the Buddy Bench would not even be an option for that socially insecure child.

If a child’s recess doesn’t go well, it most often is related to social concerns, and most students reported that a frustrating recess affects the rest of their school day - it is harder to concentrate and move-on to school work. A third grader wrote: “It affects me because if I get in trouble, I will just be thinking about it.” Another child shared their feelings about a frustrating recess: “If you had a sad recess, you’re sadder for the day.” A different third grader wrote: “A frustrating recess affects the rest of my day because I’m not able to focus on my work, and I’ll be distracted the rest of the day.”

During my observations at Central School, and in analyzing the ninety-five student journals, less than ten children reported that having a frustrating recess would not affect them later in the school day, so nearly ninety percent of children self-reported having a difficult time in the academic aspects of school if they had a difficult recess. After a challenging day, one fourth grade boy wrote: “Since my recess was unsuccessful my mind isn’t very clear and I have to erase when I write or write over it because I can’t think clearly. Right now I can’t think clearly. My handwriting is also sloppy, and I just missed the directions too.” We cannot expect children to move on from social frustrations seamlessly, without it affecting their academics and the rest of their day.

When children are happy at recess, they are more successful in the academic aspects of school and they feel better about their day. A third grade boy wrote: “A successful recess makes me happy.” And being happy should be a goal we have to support all of our students as they develop socially and academically.

Conclusion

During the data collection and analysis process of this study, I triangulated information from interviews with yard duty supervisors, administrators, and teachers; these adults choose to work with children for various reasons, but they all agree the most successful recess is one when students are happy and having fun. The student journals that I collected and read shared the same information, having a fun recess put students in a better mood and in a better place to tackle the rest of their school day. Based on all of this information, the overarching themes of this project include primarily that the *Teacher-Recess Disconnect* is an impediment to students from being fully supported at recess. Secondly, by *Supporting Student Transition Time*, the teacher clearly labels that a change in the student's day is happening and supports children to switch from social interactions to academic learning time. The final theme arising from this study is that *Social Connectedness on the Playground Affects the Classroom Environment*; children are able to have a more positive academic experience in the classroom if their social involvement was positive on the playground.

Implications

When students who are struggling socially do not have support from their teachers, they cannot thrive in social environments, such as on the recess playground. The teacher disconnect from recess is not a problem to be brushed aside; it is a concern that should be acknowledged, discussed, and figured out. When teachers are able to connect with what is happening on the playground, they are better able to support all of their student's needs. Moreover, by supporting student transition times, teachers can clearly designate that a change in the child's day is happening and prepare students to switch from academic mode to social mode.

When students are socially connected on the playground, they are happier at school and perform stronger in their classroom academics. On the playground, students are most happy when they have successful social interactions and connections with peers. While in the classroom, teachers do their best to support the diverse needs of each learner, differentiating curriculum and supporting those who cannot yet read; however, there is a lack of guidance for students once they enter the world of recess. Therefore, when a teacher is able to strengthen her understanding of each student's academic and social needs, both the students and the teachers benefit.

Implications from the Literature

Findings from prior research clearly demonstrate that happiness and social satisfaction are directly related to successful relationships and academic schoolwork (Walton & Cohen, 2011). A child's connectedness in society includes the amount of personal connections he or she has and the quality of those relationships. According to McCabe and contributors (2011), there is a strong correlation between the use of regular positive

psychology techniques and a person's heightened levels of satisfaction with life. Techniques of positive psychology include gratitude journals, physical exercise, and meditation; these simple routines may positively impact a child's outlook on recess and her day at school.

Through the journal writing activities at Central School, students were exposed once a week to aspects of positive psychology in regards to their recess experiences. Students were asked about their favorite parts of recess, what they most looked forward to, and how they could write a plan for their best recess. By using these positive psychology techniques, students were put in a positive mindset before going outside for recess and also given time to reflect on the great things that happened outside. When children reported having a positive experience at recess, they said it greatly affected the rest of their school day, so using techniques to boost positive thoughts directly affects the classroom environment.

Prior researchers have found there is a distinct difference between the way that most girls and boys play while out at recess. Twarek and George (1994) found that boys typically have a wider range of activities to choose from at recess compared to girls. Boys tend to participate in the competitive, larger-group activities while girls often chose non-competitive, small-group activities, such as walking and talking.

On any given recess, there are numerous barriers for a child to overcome in order to have a great time. Research by Stanley, et al. (2012) stated that the top reason children reported not fully participating in physical activity during recess is because of lacking access to the appropriate space, which could mean the space is being occupied by other children or might refer to the condition of the materials available. Children also shared that inclimate weather and school uniforms were barriers to having a successful recess experience.

The children at Central School wrote in their journals about choosing gender normative activities, similar to those in the report by Twarek and George (1994). Mostly, the girls enjoyed sitting and chatting or going to the library, while the boys generally preferred the organized athletic activities. The barriers to a successful recess at Central School were different than what Stanley, et al. found; the students do not wear uniforms and the weather during my visits was generally nice enough to play outside. In this study at Central School, the largest barrier children shared was having negative interactions with friends.

Children with an unsettled home life or those with special needs benefit most from transition support; but, regardless of individual differences, all students could use extra support (Jarrett, Maxwell, Dickerson, Hoge, Davies, & Yetley, 1998). Research from Jarrett, and colleagues (1998) states that minority children and those living in transient housing have an especially difficult time settling down after recess. In knowing that several children in a classroom could greatly benefit from the additional support during transitions, there is no harm in spending an extra moment supporting a classroom of students when even one child might benefit. On the playground at Central School, the majority of students do not need the extra support; however, every child can benefit from extra guidance. In the classroom teachers would find that students who have a difficult time settling down after recess would be more responsive if given time for post-recess reflection to work out any concerns they are processing.

In the data collected at Central School, there was a clear theme that teachers are disconnected from the recess experiences of their students. They are not on the playground regularly and do not have regular check-in reports from students. In working with the third and fourth grade teachers, it quickly became clear that their students do not regularly bring

recess concerns to their teacher's attention. This discovery was not expected based on prior academic research on school recess, but it clearly ties into a problem stemming from teachers being disconnected to a critical aspect of their student's school day. Based on previous research and the literature review in this report, the expectation was to find that journal writing with positive psychology techniques would benefit all students, especially those struggling socially.

Prior research highlighted the benefits of positive psychology techniques in supporting college students to feel more socially satisfied; however, no research had been done on using these techniques with young children. This study used concepts of positive psychology techniques to lead the weekly journal writing, but the overall results did not show that writing alone supported those struggling students.

Beyond the writing journals and the positive psychology techniques, this study found there is a direct link between student transitions to and from recess and the lack of knowledge from educators about what is happening with students on the recess playground. This is new data in this field of recess research. This new knowledge makes sense - teachers cannot be everywhere and see everything; however, without making the time to strengthen transitions and lessen the disconnect, teachers are doing a disservice to their students. Earlier research highlights the need for social connection, so it is critical that educators make social satisfaction a priority.

Prior to this study, researchers had yet to investigate recess as a place to improve a child's well-being and happiness (based on their social satisfaction). Therefore, one aim of this study was to explore the impact of developing a strong sense of social belonging on a child's level of happiness, both on and off the playground. The findings from the research

indicate that, when students are happier during recess, the rest of the day becomes more successful.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results of this study have implications for potential positive social change on an individual level for students and teachers and on an organizational level for schools and districts. At the individual level, these findings indicate that students have the ability to develop stronger social skills when supported in transitions from the classroom out to the playground and from the social setting back into the academic world. At the school and district level, the significance of these findings can be used to support teachers in changing the focus of recess support and the importance of student transition times.

If every classroom had built in preparation and reflection time, the teachers would be aware of what their students are doing at recess and be able to better support the whole child at school. Even if teachers were only able to make recess preparation and reflection a priority once a week, this important time would open a window for educators into the lives of a student's world at recess.

The common threads from the research leading to this conclusion are based on three main themes: primarily the teacher-recess disconnect, as well as in supporting student transition time, and finally that social connectedness on the playground affects the child's classroom environment.

The teacher-recess disconnect is an impediment to students from being fully supported at recess. Although most children feel confident during recess and some even approach their teacher with concerns, many children are not supported because their teachers are not aware they need extra support.

Some students overshare with their teachers; they tell them everything from what they ate for breakfast to how late they got to stay up over the weekend. Younger students especially are known for sharing these wonderful bits of knowledge with their teachers, whether it applies to what the classroom discussion is or not. However, not all students like to over share, and many times, as students grow older, they choose to share less and less, even when something might be pertinent to better supporting the student. For example, if a child did not get to eat breakfast or did not have any help with her homework project, those are important pieces of knowledge that a teacher should be aware of and most often can do something to support the struggling student at school. Through stronger connections, by asking questions or writing journals, a teacher should also be aware of any social concerns that might be overwhelming one of her students. If something is happening at recess that prevents a child from having a successful time, it can be detrimental to the rest of the school day. Schools and districts can support this by making policies about building and strengthening connections between students and teachers (for example implementing a regular journal writing routine for reflections).

Perhaps the most effective way teachers can support socially struggling students is by providing transition time between recess and the classroom. By supporting student transition time, the emphasis distinctly labels that a change in the student's day is happening and supports children to switch from social interactions to academic learning time. Transitions are an important aspect of life, and they start at a young age when parents do countdowns for their children or give them reminders of how many minutes remain for an activity. In Preschool and Kindergarten classrooms, teachers work tirelessly to prepare students for their upcoming transitions by practicing their lines and taking the extra time to train students to

respond to the what the bell signals. However, as the children grow up, less and less time is dedicated to the importance of a transition, especially a drastic one like moving from academic work to the social demands of recess. As students get older, teachers do not take any time regularly to prepare or reflect on what is happening in the child's world when a transition comes up. By building in transition time through a post-recess reflection, a teacher would be able to reflect on her student's experiences at recess, connect with what happened out on the playground, and support all students in their transition from social time to academic work.

If a teacher is able to take the time to honor a transition by preparing a student for the upcoming change, or reflecting on what happened, it validates the transition and supports students as they shift from one activity to the next. Honoring transitions legitimizes student feelings that this is an important time in school and that their feelings about the change are important.

When a teacher is able to build transition time into the school day, there is a built-in moment to prepare and reflect on what happened during recess. Even a quick thumbs-up or thumbs-down activity during a transition would validate the student's experiences and allow a teacher to connect with their recess struggles and successes. Preparation and reflection moments do not have to take a long time in order for students to share their feelings, thus allowing a teacher to better understand her students.

Finally, social connectedness on the playground affects the classroom environment; children are able to have a more positive academic experience in the classroom if their social involvement was positive on the playground. Recess disagreements are bound to happen, but if a child has been prepared for recess, they may be able to better handle a situation. And if

that child is given time to reflect on their recess experiences, they will most likely process what happened and move-on more quickly. Students shared in their journals how hard school can be if they have had a negative experience on the playground, and by supporting children in the classroom, teachers are able to support children in all aspects of their school day.

In order for this research to have a positive impact on the students at Central School, it is recommended that the administration and teachers place greater importance on supporting students who struggle socially. A school-wide policy implementing transition times for preparation and reflection before and after recess would benefit every child and build a stronger recess connection for the teachers. If teachers took time at least one day each week to support students in creating a recess plan and reflecting on their recess experiences, this would eliminate the teacher's disconnect, strengthen teacher-student relationships, and ultimately raise the academic achievement potential because their students would be more connected on the playground.

Limitations of the Study

The data for this study was compiled over the period of several months, but the student journal writing samples were only collected during a four week time frame. Thus, one limitation of the study was the time frame; the study might have more validity if the student journal writing samples were compiled over many months instead of several weeks. Having journal writing samples from multiple months would allow greater insight into what was going on more consistently in the lives of these students. In having more time in the classrooms, there might have been an option to visit more than only four rooms in order to collect a more diverse view on the recess experience. Although ninety-five student journals

was enough data to find clear patterns, collecting data from more classrooms or across a longer period of time might have led to additional perspectives about students' recess experiences.

All of the participants in this study were students or employees of Central School, which is located in a mostly well-funded community. Of the four teachers, three yard duty, and two administrators interviewed, all were female and most were white. The students were all third or fourth grade students. Thus, despite collecting valuable information, the perspectives represented in this study are limited to this community and lack diversity. Although Central School is a public school with both English language learners and students receiving free and reduced meals, the information in this study might have been different coming from a more diverse or urban setting.

Directions for Future Research

As noted earlier, one of the goals in this study is to explore the ways in which recess can be utilized to provide students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen overall happiness while at school. Based on the findings through the work at Central School, it is suggested that the above theories which I attempted to describe—the teacher-recess disconnect, supporting student transition times, and social connectedness on the playground affecting the classroom environment—can enhance future research exploring students' social connectedness and overall happiness, both in a child's social-emotional education and in other educational contexts. I encourage more research that helps to clarify *why* some students feel more socially connected than others. It would be particularly interesting to have research that helps us better understand to what extent we can support each and every child in their lives as social beings and integral parts of a larger community. We would also benefit

from more research and theorizing that examines the role that social satisfaction plays in a child's academic achievements, most specifically if there is a causation between a happy child and her grades.

Conclusion

This study looked at the connection between a child's social satisfaction with their recess experience and their general happiness at school. Recess is a critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of a student's day. Depending on how a child feels about what is offered outside and who they are playing with, recess can make or break a child's school experience.

When this project began, the goal was to explore ways in which recess can be utilized to provide students an opportunity to connect socially and strengthen overall happiness at school. By investigating the role social satisfaction plays in a child's life during recess, the collected data opened a window into the world of recess from a child's perspective. Recess, from a child's point of view, is not merely a time to eat snack and run around, but it is a critical time to meet with friends and build relationships with peers.

The findings from this research project demonstrate that, when students who are struggling socially do not have their teachers available to support their recess experience, there are social and emotional consequences for these children. Without the necessary support from adults, these students will not develop the skills to strengthen social connections. In this study, one of the themes that presented itself is the teacher's disconnect from their student's recess experiences. Another theme to arise from the study was the lack of support for student transition time from academic to social, which should be a time to clearly designate that a change in the child's day is happening and prepare students to switch from academic mode to social mode. The final theme arising from this study is that social connectedness on the playground affects the classroom environment because children are unable to leave a frustrating recess experience behind them without any reflection or discussion. When students are socially connected on the playground, they are happier at school and perform stronger in their classroom academics.

This study sought to answer several questions about student's social satisfaction during recess, and the collected data from students and adults clarified many points on this topic. The students wrote in their journals about their feelings of how recess affects their school day; if their experiences were positive on the playground, they were happy and able to attend to their school work; however, if they had a negative experience, students reported being unable to focus in the classroom and feeling mad throughout the rest of their day. Friendships and social connections were reported by students and teachers as being a critical aspect to having fun during recess, but having an argument on the playground was the second largest reason students expressed not having a positive experience. If recess was not successful, the third and fourth graders described feelings of frustration and sadness which transitioned into their classroom; it prohibited them from transitioning smoothly or doing their work well. When the students at Central School had a frustrating recess experience, they often did not offer that information to an adult; they kept their feelings inside because there was not a time or place to safely share what happened. Due to the lack of students self-reporting their problems, teachers are disconnected from what happens on the playground and that negatively affects their students.

If teachers are able to connect with what is happening on the playground, they are better able to support all of their student's needs. In light of these findings, the take-aways for teachers from this project are to recognize that children need support beyond the classroom walls and one of the ways to better support all children is by implementing a routine of checking in before and after recess. If teachers are able to create a routine where preparation and reflection of recess are routines, children will begin to share their experiences and better connect with their teachers and peers. Time for teachers is always

valuable, therefore the preparation and reflection routine does not need to be a daily occurrence. In this project, the students wrote in their journals before and after recess for ten to fifteen minutes just once a week and, during this time, they not only created recess plans but also reflected on their experiences and shared any struggles. If fifteen minutes is too much to spare, teachers can create any routine that works within the day to better support students during this critical transition, even a quick thumbs-up or thumbs-down will allow students to process their feelings and share what they are thinking. Anything to support our students is better than nothing.

In a case where teachers or the school know of several students who would benefit from more directed support, it would be most supportive to create a targeted intervention to check in more often with those who are struggling during recess. Most schools take this targeted intervention approach for students who are struggling academically and not meeting their standards, however social concerns rarely receive the same level of intervention. Social concerns should be taken just as seriously.

In completing the research for this study, it was unexpected to discover that teachers are disconnected from their student's recess experiences. Teachers spend roughly seven hours each weekday with their students and yet, most teachers do not know what their students do while they are on the playground. By the third and fourth grades, most students do not self-report seemingly minor disagreements and social frustrations, which leads to teachers being completely unaware of what is happening while their students are not in the classroom. However, when it comes to academic instruction, teachers work hard to assess and differentiate lessons for their students on a daily basis; they know what level their

students are at and where they are striving to go. Unfortunately, when it comes to recess there is a severe lack of understanding and the students are suffering.

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Appendix: IRB Approval Letter



December 5, 2017

Elizabeth Teasdale Wells
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Elizabeth:

I have reviewed your proposal entitled *Satisfaction During Elementary School Recess* submitted to the Dominican University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants (IRBPHP Application, #10624). I am approving it as having met the requirements for minimizing risk and protecting the rights of the participants in your research.

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,



Randall Hall, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Jennifer Lucko