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Why it is important to keep recess in schools

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Why it is important to keep recess in schools

Abstract

Recess is a common part of most elementary school schedules yet its benefits are often not clearly articulated. As a result recess may be thought to be expendable from school curricula as school districts adjust already full schedules in an attempt to accommodate every necessary component.

This research review explores the relationship of recess to school schedules, time allotments, activities commonly observed at recess, and developmental (social, cognitive, and psychomotor) aspects of recess in schools. Also addressed are common criticisms of recess in schools.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP RECESS IN SCHOOLS

A Graduate Review
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Mary Lou McGee Cushing
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This Research Review by: Mary Lou McGee Cushing

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
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CHAPTER I

This literature review addresses recess in schools, also known as breaktime or playtime. It may involve a child just running from one end of the playground to the other end. It may involve a large group of children interacting with each other. In watching small children at play on the playground how could an onlooker not believe that learning is taking place?

As superintendents, principals, and teachers plan school-schedules they want to use time efficiently and effectively. Schools have a set amount of time in daily schedules to meet the educational needs of the students served. There seems to be a common assumption among many parents, politicians, and educators that there should be an increased amount of work time in school schedules (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996). In addressing the pressures of including increased amounts of subject matter in daily schedules, recess is a component that becomes vulnerable to sacrifice. One worry is that "recess is being eliminated because its value for children is poorly understood by staff" (Johnson, 1996, p. 82).

Research Problem

The various benefits of recess are rarely articulated. As a result, recess may be thought of as an expendable component of school schedules.

Research Question

The following question guides the development of this literature review: Why is it important to keep recess in a formal elementary school setting?

Project Purpose

This research review will help readers develop a more informed view of recess in schools. There will be discussion of time allotments set aside for recess. A closer look will be taken at children's activities commonly observed at recess. Finally, the positive aspects of recess and the common criticisms of recess will be explored. The positive aspects to be discussed will focus on developmental components (social, cognitive, and psychomotor). Common criticisms such as recess being frivolous, a waste of time, a non-learning activity, and a time for aggressive behavior will also be addressed in this research review.

Rationale for Review

Some school systems in North America and Europe are choosing to minimize the role of recess in their schools by replacing it with

teacher-guided physical education or by eliminating recess completely. Such cuts are based on the belief that recess “detracts from school’s primary mission: teaching the 3R’s” (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996, p. 7). According to these authors, this policy of eliminating recess is devoid of empirical justification and data that do exist support the concept that recess has a beneficial role in schools.

Recess, breaktime, or playtime has been a common part of school curricula for more than a century. One of the earliest historical mentions of playgrounds in the United States can be found in the work of Henry Barnard (1848). A pioneer of the Common School Movement, Barnard had illustrations of school playground architecture in his book, School Architecture. Since that time, recess has generally been a scheduled part of preschool and elementary school children’s days. The number of recess breaks in a day and their duration vary from school to school. Despite variation in the amounts of time devoted, “Breaktime in schools is deeply grained into the school day” (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994, p. 7).

Terminology

In beginning this paper it was very difficult to locate materials defining the term recess. As the literature search continued, other related terms, for example breaktime and playtime,

surfaced as descriptors in relationship to the topic. So for purposes of this paper the words recess, breaktime, and playtime will be used interchangeably.

Breaktime. Breaktime is a term for recess time in regard to the secondary level encompassing children ages 11 to 16 years (Blatchford, 1996, p.14).

Playtime. In the United Kingdom, playtime is a term used in reference to recess for primary level children, ages 4 to 11 years (Blatchford, 1996, p.14).

Primary. In this research review the United Kingdom's definition will be used. Primary consists of children 4-11 years of age (Blatchford, 1996, p.14).

Recess. Recess "is a break (either indoors or outdoors) from academic work, where children are free to choose and engage in an activity on their own terms" (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996, p.7). The term recess is predominantly used in the United States to describe elementary school children's breaktimes.

Secondary. In this research review the United Kingdom definition will be used. Secondary level students consist of children ages 11-16 years (Blatchford, 1996, p. 14).

CHAPTER II

What Is Recess?

Recess takes place in a wide variety of physical spaces or areas. Some possible recess areas might be a small grassy area, a large asphalt area with minimal climbing structures, a complex area with multiple structures to climb on and about or at times it might be an indoor setting with a variety of possibilities. If an observer had an opportunity to fly overhead and look down over school grounds it would be noticed that for many schools the buildings occupy a small part of the total area. Yet in contrast “in many cases, the surrounding grounds, including the playground, occupy a larger area” (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994, p.2). In some cases where school grounds include a playing field or other large open area, the buildings are dwarfed by the grounds. In spatial terms, break or recess sites usually take up a large part of a school site, particularly in non-urban areas. Until recently not much thought has been given to how this space is used or to whether or not learning is taking place during recess.

Recess is a unique part of a child’s day. “School recess, or playtime, is a break period, typically held outdoors, for children” (Pellegrini, 1995, p.3). It is usually a time where the environment or setting has already been determined by the combined efforts of

school boards, administrators, and teachers. However, the child about to embark on a recess period is the person who automatically chooses the best way in which learning is most likely to take place (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988).

In considering the purpose of recess “there can be little doubt that children are learning things at breaktime” (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994, p.2). Recess is a time when children can interact with peers on their own terms with minimal adult intervention. In providing such an environment, spontaneous peer interaction can be experienced by students and observed by teachers, which is not always true in a classroom setting (Pellegrini, 1995). By being free of adult constraints and direction recess is a setting that naturally shows how children behave in one another’s company (Blatchford, 1994).

Tizard et al. (1988) as cited in Blatchford and Sharp (1994, p.2) “found that 28 per cent of the school day was spent in playtime and lunch - much of this spent on the playground.” This to the author is almost identical in importance to the time spent in traditional core aspects of the curriculum such as reading, writing, and math. As flour and salt make up a sizable amount of our world’s human diet as staples, “recess is a staple in our schools” (Pellegrini, 1995, p.3). A staple is a necessity item for humans (a need), not an expendable

item (a want). Recess should therefore be considered a needed staple in schools.

Recess In Schools

In the literature reviewed, most reference was made to recess in schools in the United States and the United Kingdom. In 1989 a national survey on recess practices was conducted by the National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP) as cited in Pellegrini (1995). The survey was sent to 51 state-superintendents of schools (including Washington, D.C.). Responses were received from 47 of those 51 superintendents. Upon analyzing data from state superintendents across the country it was found that 90% of United States school districts had some form of recess and that approximately 96 percent of those schools have recess one to two times a day. It was found in 75 percent of these cases that the breaks were 15 to 20 minutes in duration. For example, in one of the largest school systems in America, the New York City school system, four to five-year-old children are given 30 minutes per day for recess although some schools can not meet this goal because of limited space and facilities (Kass, 1989).

At first a figure of 90% sounds like most schools do have recess, so what's the concern? However in reading further,

Kass (1989) had noted some unsettling facts about schools that do not have recess. The state of Alabama, as of 1989, had required gym classes for grades one to eight for a full period each day. However in the same state, during the same period, and for the same grade levels, scheduled recess periods were not required. It was noted that some educators felt recess and physical education were the same or nearly identical in how they benefit children at school.

Kass (1989) also found that in Loudon County, Virginia, from 1972-1987, recess had been left out of the school curriculum. Due to the fact that recess had been eliminated for 15 years a parent of a first grade child in 1987 stated that the child had no idea what recess was. In response to subsequent parental requests the school board of that district reinstated recess in the schools for the following school year. Where recess would occur in each school's schedule was left to the discretion of the building principal. It appears that perceptions of the importance of recess on the part of educators and parents can be a powerful factor in determining whether or not recess is included in school schedules.

“When is recess?” These words can be heard often by elementary or primary school teachers from their students

throughout the school day in the United States. Recess is also a common part of schools in the United Kingdom and pupils in England have recess throughout their compulsory schooling. A survey (Blatchford & Sumpner, 1996, as cited in Blatchford, 1996) found that most schools in the United Kingdom have a 15-20 minute mid-morning break and sometimes the same duration of a break in the afternoon. They also have a one hour break at lunchtime.

Blatchford et al. (1990) found in talking to eleven-year-old children from London schools, that recess was a popular part of the day. Eighty-four percent of these 11 year old children said they liked dinnertime (lunchtime) recess. Boys liked dinnertime break better than girls. When looking at morning playtime there was no difference in girls' and boys' preferences. Seventy-two percent liked or loved morning playtime. In regard to afternoon playtime other than play periods associated with mealtime, one-fourth of the children were in schools that did not have afternoon playtime. Of those who did, fifty-five percent liked or loved it. Girls liked afternoon playtime better than boys liked the afternoon break.

Some of the reasons children gave for why they liked playtime was because it gave them a break from their work,

they could be with friends, and they liked the games they can play (Blatchford, et al, 1990). Children's liking of recess may be linked to the idea that "in play we confirm our existence and affirm our worth" (Kusyszyn, 1977, p. 23).

Play Activities at Recess

The bulk of research on activities that take place at recess has been conducted mostly in terms of primary school children (Blatchford, 1994, p. 23). This may be due to the fact that it is thought in secondary schools the need no longer exists for outdoor play (Blatchford, 1994).

Play has certain essential characteristics. To be play an activity needs to be "intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, non-literal, and actively engaged in by the participants" (Hughes, 1991, p.22). In relation to children approximately ages three to six, Piaget (1951) sees play to be mostly of a symbolic nature. Symbolic play is comprised of pretend games and socio-dramatic play, in pairs or small groups. Pretend games are often made up as the players go along, similar to theater improvisation. The 'scripts' of socio-dramatic play, are usually familiar to those involved: for example firefighters putting out fires, doctors giving medicine, or parents caring for children. If the players

involved share a basic knowledge of the script, the socio-dramatic play can be sustained over a period of time and through a sequence of actions. These games can then be an important stepping stone to more obviously rule-governed games that follow. There appears to be a rapid decline in pretend play around the age of nine (Smith, 1994).

The primary age child may be seen as mostly involved in chasing games, seeking games, and racing games. Opie (1969) defined chasing games as games that involve a player trying to touch others who are running freely in a prescribed area. One of the most common chasing games found was that of 'it', 'had', or 'he' (Blatchford, 1996), what children in the Midwestern United States refer to as "tag".

Primary age children are also beginning to play in larger groups. These groups increase in size up to adolescence. One explanation for this is as children become older their skills develop and they are more coordinated, so they feel more comfortable participating in a large group (Smith, 1994).

A longitudinal study, from 1982 to 1991, of a group of students from inner London schools, gave the children's views on recess activity preferences and how those views changed from primary school to secondary school. In this particular

study the children were interviewed at age seven, then at age eleven, and again at age sixteen. A core of 72 children was interviewed at all three ages (Blatchford, 1996).

There were limited data collected from the children at age seven. Tizard et al. (1988, as cited in Blatchford, 1996) had found that students at age seven liked playtime. The students in this longitudinal study agreed and said the main activities they were involved in at recess were running around and playing games.

The data collected from the same children at age eleven indicated that eleven-year-old children chose ball games (football or soccer, netball, basketball, and cricket), and chasing games (it, had, he) as the most popular games they participated in at recess. In respect to other activities "talking to friends, walking, hanging around, and just sitting down"; listed here in preference order, were most commonly named as activities during recess (Blatchford, 1996, p. 17).

The data collected from the same children at age sixteen in regard to their breaktime said that their "most popular activity was talking to friends, hanging around and socializing" (Blatchford, 1996 p. 18). Working during

breaktime was the second most popular activity that the sixteen-year-old children chose (Blatchford, 1996).

Gender Differences and Secondary Breaktime

A study of secondary students' recess preferences in a rural public school in the state of Georgia is cited in Pellegrini (1995). A sample of 133 students, out of the school population of 305, was involved in the study. The group consisted of 71 sixth graders with a mean age of 12.7 years and 62 seventh graders with a mean age of 13.8 years. The daily recess periods consisted of one 15-20 minute period early in the morning and another 15-20 minute period after lunch. The students could choose to be indoors or outdoors for these break periods. The study found that the sixth graders spent more sustained periods outdoors than did the seventh graders. Boys in general spent more time outdoors than girls (Pellegrini, 1995).

Prior to the Pellegrini study, Blatchford (1994) had noted the following observations about differences in male and female recess behaviors at the secondary level. Boys liked open areas for games; girls liked to play close to the building. Boys liked to play with more players at one time; girls liked small groups. Boys liked more competitive games and girls

liked more social games. Boys tended to play football or be alone; girls had a greater variety of activities. Finally, boys chose games that were competitive, aggressive, and physical, but girls chose games that took more coordination and agility (Blatchford, 1994). In observing children's play "sex differences become more exaggerated with age" (Blatchford, 1994, p. 23)

Positive Aspects of Play

American culture has not traditionally valued children's play. Puritan roots that saw play as frivolous may have contributed to this way of thinking. Educators need to realize play is a "crucial part of real learning" (Brett, Moore, & Provenzo, 1993, p. 3). Contemporary society often fails to realize the important role play takes in the process of education and learning.

Play can also be seen as a "precursor to creativity, abstract thinking, spontaneity, imagination, and make-believe" (Levy, 1978, p. 68). Therrel (1989) stated "Play is like love. Both have so many kinds, levels, and degrees" (p. 8).

Brett, Moore, & Provenzo (1993, p. 3) provide the following list outlining the importance of children's play:

1. When children play, they explore a variety of possibilities and ways of achieving goals, which helps them develop problem-solving skills.

2. When children play, they learn to use symbols and think abstractly.

3. When children play, they are freed from externally imposed rules and are allowed to generate their own situations, roles, and rules.

4. When children play, they are given the opportunity to negotiate with each other, learn social skills, and increase their range and use of language.

5. When children play, they learn about the physical world, the objects it contained, and their potential.

6. When children play they learn to become actively engaged and to give their attention to something.

7. When children play, they have the opportunity to act out situations and to deal with the emotional components of these situations

8. When children play, they practice and integrate their emerging skills.

This list confirms the fact that play enhances the following developmental areas in a child: 1) intellectual

(cognitive), 2) psychological (affective), and 3) physiological (psychomotor). In integrating all aspects of development, play helps develop a fully functioning person (Brett, Moore, & Provenzo, 1993). The rest of this section will address the positive aspects of recess in relationship to the developmental areas stated above.

Intellectual/Cognitive Aspects of Play. Brett, Moore, and Provenzo (1993) explain the cognitive categorization as multidimensional. "Cognitive development includes language, symbolism, mathematical relationships, and scientific principles" (p. 3). Cooperative peer interaction that happens during play requires higher level cognitive strategies such as conversational skills, perspective taking, and rule compliance.

Recess is a time where children are motivated to use their cognitive skills to the best of their ability. "Children are highly motivated to play simply because they enjoy it. Thus, they are willing to expend the cognitive resources necessary to participate in events they deem worthy of such effort" (Pellegrini, 1995, p. 185). If anyone doubts this they need only take a look at the oral language a child uses during social fantasy play as compared to the oral language the same child uses in assessment contexts. Just as some adult football

players put more effort toward a football game they value, a child will put more effort into using language skills at recess, a time they value (Pellegrini, 1995).

Recess is often a time when a great number of same-age playmates are together without adult intervention. This kind of environment is usually not experienced elsewhere (Smith, 1994). In this environment a child interacts with a variety of other children, which facilitates their language development (Pellegrini, Galda, & Rubin, 1984). Children that are involved in these situations “must verbally explicate meaning: they cannot rely on knowledge assumptions” (Pellegrini, 1995, p.183). In considering cognitive and affective development “social and cognitive abilities are intimately related in the playground context” (Smith, 1994, p.36).

Psychological/Affective Aspects of Play. Playground games are typically social. Whether actual learning or practice of what the learner already knows is happening on the playground “recess behavior has important implications for traditional measures of achievement” (Pellegrini, 1995, p. 64).

Research has been conducted in two related areas; social skills and social cognition. Social skills refer to the child’s ability to manage the environment through cooperation;

helping, sharing, and successful social problem-solving. Social cognition is the child's ability to think about the world (Rubin, 1980b).

Piaget's (1970), work shows the theoretical link between play and social functioning. Children are intrinsically motivated to interact socially. When children play, conflicts arise as a result of their inherent egocentricity. As children negotiate conflicts they move beyond being egocentric and expand what they know of the social world.

Recess is a time where children can interact socially with minimal intervention. In regard to affective benefits the "playground offers children the opportunity for peer interaction in the context of which many lessons relevant to adult life are learnt" (Blatchford, 1994, p. 17). Some additional lessons the playground offers children include: "they learn how to join in a game, how to choose and avoid rules, how to deal with people who cheat or make trouble, and above all else how to manipulate situations to their own advantage (Slukin, 1981, p.119). The social forms of play foster cooperation in children.

Play also helps children see beyond themselves and see a situation through another person's eyes. "This ability to

assume the roles, or viewpoints, of others is necessary for the establishment of close interpersonal communication and among older children, is related to altruistic, or helping, behavior” (Hughes, 1991, p.199). One affective aspect of recess is that “Play = C.O.O.L. Kids, Cooperative, Open, Optimistic, Loving” (Therrel, 1989, p.2).

The affective dimension is critical for another reason. A main component of childrens’ social lives centers around establishing friendships. Psychological researchers such as Livesley and Bromley (1973) have found that the psychological aspects of friendship are increasingly emphasized as children grow older. “Children use complex strategies to bargain with friends. These are not for love of a friend but because of functions that friendship serves” (Blatchford, 1994, p. 27).

These researchers also found that young childrens’ friendships are based primarily upon everyday proximity. A child’s view of a friend differs from an adult’s view. Young children call someone their friend not because of likable qualities but because they spend time with that child. As adults we might perceive these friendships to be unstable when in fact they are quite stable. This would suggest that

the playground setting is significant in the development of young childrens' friendships (Blatchford, 1994).

Few would deny the importance of acquiring social skills as a part of becoming a functioning person in contemporary society. Stated below are some social skills children can learn at recess (Goodnow & Burns, 1985, as cited in Blatchford, 1994):

- making successful overtures
- working out which children not to be friends with
- maintaining an equal input into the relationship
- not putting too much trust in those likely to be fickle
- not being stuck with friends who no longer appeal
- avoiding a situation where one is stranded in a friendless state (p. 26).

These can clearly be seen as very positive aspects of recess in regard to affective development.

An environment, such as recess, that allows children time to play and interact freely becomes a place where children reveal more about themselves and learn more about their social world. This is different from what children commonly reveal about themselves in more closely supervised environments such as classrooms (Sharp & Blatchford, 1994).

The social domain created at recess is one that permits children to practice social skills and cement friendships in an atmosphere where “children learn valuable social skills that are integral to adult life” (Sharp & Blatchford, 1994, p. 187).

When problems or challenges arise the playful attitude present at recess invites flexibility in problem-solving. When children at play lack a certain element, for example a long jump rope, this problem may be addressed in a variety of ways without assistance from an adult. One child might give up and play something else. Another might tie two small jump ropes together to continue to play. Still another child might spend the whole recess period pondering possible solutions to the problem. Whatever the eventual outcome, children have the opportunity to try a variety of solutions (Rodgers & Sawyers, 1988).

Pellegrini (1995) explored children’s social competence in school settings in relationship to behaviors exhibited on the playground. The term social competence was explained as the ways in which children adapt to school. Pellegrini (1995, p.55) refers to this adaption as the “ability to get along with peers and teachers, as well as more traditional dimensions of achievement-related behavior.” Behavior that occurs at recess

can be thought of as a good indicator of social competence due to the fact that the students are highly motivated and interact with each other on their own terms with little adult intervention (Pellegrini, 1995).

Pellegrini's (1988) study of children's self-selected behaviors in a playground setting took place at a public elementary school, encompassing grades K-5, in Athens, Georgia. Ninety-four students received parental permission to participate. The study found that children used the environment in different ways that best suited them. A popular playscape area provided a good example. Some children would use the area for physically vigorous behavior while other children would use the area for passive, physically quiet forms of behavior (Pellegrini, 1988; 1995). This information affirms that "individuals' behavior, on playgrounds at least, is not coerced by the environment" (Pellegrini, 1995, p. 58).

The study also found that girls who were involved in socially cooperative interaction were liked by their peers and were good social problem solvers (Pellegrini, 1988; 1995). It was found that game playing had a cognitive component and playground games like hopscotch (with grids made by the

children themselves) and jump rope, exercised cognitive processes (Pellegrini, 1988; 1995).

The study found that young boys who played vigorously were not popular. This may be because they lacked social skills to participate in games that are more rule-governed. Overly vigorous behavior and games do not mix well at the elementary level. Adolescent boys, however, were not perceived to be deficient in social skills, although they used aggression to get attention and access to games (Pellegrini, 1988; 1995).

Psychomotor/Physiological Aspects of Play. The psychomotor development area consists of coordination and large or small motor control development (Brett, Moore, Provenzo, Jr., 1993). This author found surprisingly few articles that directly discussed the psychomotor aspects of recess. Yet in addressing the overall value of recess “one of the original purposes of school breaks was the opportunity it gave youngsters to run around and take physical exercise” (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994, p. 187). Keeping in mind the lack of exercise routines and poor diet of many school age children, recess may need to be maintained or reinstated purely for its physical benefits (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994).

Physical and mental actions are directly connected in the play of children ages two to seven. Basic movement skills such as running, jumping, skipping, and galloping are perfected at this age. Children then begin to incorporate these skills in racing, aiming games, and chasing. "Similarly, fundamental movement skills from the preschool and kindergarten period are combined by the young school-aged child into complex motor tasks such as cartwheels and backward rolls" (Rodgers & Sawyers, 1988, p. 29). Children may use these skills alone or in combination, possibly in games with rules.

Pellegrini (1995) conducted an ethological (systematic study of the formation of human character) observation of primary school children's playground behaviors. Some of the resulting behaviors are related to large and small motor development and coordination. Some of the categories and behaviors derived from the study include: 1) vigorous play, run, skip, hop, jump, slide, swing, and climb; 2) games with rules such as jump rope, tag, clap/sing, ball-game, catch; and 3) object play, throwing an object, active, quiet, small motor, large motor, active, quiet. The motor skills children use during recess activities lead to the development of fine motor and gross motor skills (Brett, Moore, Provenzo, Jr., 1993). A

more extensive list of physical activities (Therrel, 1989, p. 74) at recess for children ages five to eight and nine to twelve can be found in Appendix A.

Criticisms of Recess

In this part of the literature review some common criticisms of recess will be addressed. The two most prevalent areas of criticism were that recess is a waste of time and that too much aggression occurs at recess time.

In addressing the concern that recess is a waste of time a quote from philosopher Bertrand Russell's essay titled "In Praise of Idleness" comes to mind:

I think there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous, and that what needs to be preached in modern industrial countries is quite different from what always has been preached (Russell, 1935, p. 11).

The essence of this essay is that the stress of continuous hard work is harmful to our society. "Society would be better served if more time were spent in 'idleness' than in hard work. By idleness, Russell means leisure and play, the very stuff of children's recess behavior" (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996, p. 5).

In North America and the United Kingdom, many educators, parents, and politicians want work time in our schools increased. Their view is that school days need to be extended and “fluff” such as recess and play, should be discarded from our schools. The argument that recess takes time away from productive work time is not based on empirical evidence nor upon careful consideration of children’s intellectual/cognitive and psychological/affective needs. The issue at hand is the belief that increasing a child’s hours of instruction automatically increases learning. “This however, is not the same as stating more intense, break-free hours of instruction will enhance learning” (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996, p. 5).

Recess may be seen as an essentially unproductive time intended to overcome boredom. However from a developmental perspective it is beneficial. It helps children deal effectively with the cognitive demands they face in their daily lives at various developmental periods (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996).

Human intelligence is not naturally matched with tasks such as seat work, reading, or matching state capitals with their states. “By recognizing the unnaturalness of formal education, especially for young children, educators can develop

practices that optimize children's learning. Recess, particularly for young children is such a practice" (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996, p. 7). In having recess periods across a day, cognitive interference can be minimized when "opportunities to engage in nonfocused, nonintellectual activities should afford them respite to "re-energize" their nervous systems (perhaps literally) so that they can continue to learn in school" (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996, p. 9). This could be why children pay attention more easily after a recess break (Johnson, 1996).

Recess is a time when children play and experience social interaction. If one looks at play as a child's work, one can easily see it as a productive and beneficial time for children, not a waste of time. In general, recess should be viewed as an essential part of a school day not merely a discretionary feature (Johnson, 1996).

Another criticism of recess is that the playground seems to be a common place for aggression to take place. The playground is also a place for one to observe rough and tumble play (R&T). The problem that arises is how to make a distinction between aggression and R&T in children's behavior. Before attempting to draw some distinctions between R&T and

aggression, two episodes of playground behavior will be presented.

In the first, an eleven-year-old boy chased another across the playground at full speed before he caught up with him and grabbed him around the neck. The first boy maneuvered the second boy into a bear hug, which, with the struggling of the second boy, ended up as a head lock. The boy who was restraining the other delivered a number of punches to the face of his opponent, who broke free some thirty seconds later and made good his escape by running away at full speed. In the second episode, two other eleven-year-old boys stood facing each other. The smaller of the two boys poked the other with his index finger lightly but repeatedly for some twenty seconds. The other boy used his hand to try to deflect these pokes. While he did not appear to be unduly upset by being on the receiving end of them, he did show signs that he would have liked to move away from the other boy (Boulton, M., 1994, p. 49).

Before revealing the nature (aggression or R&T) of either episode, this section will state some characteristics of R&T behavior and aggressive behavior.

Both R&T play and aggression involve the actions of hitting, wrestling, poking, kicking, and chasing. Aggression commonly involves competition over resources such as equipment or space, R&T behavior does not. Aggression usually involves serious facial expressions such as frowning, staring, or crying, where R&T behavior usually involves playful expressions such as smiling or laughing. In aggressive behavior usually only two people are involved where in R&T (play fighting) more than two children may be involved. Genuine aggression tends to drive players apart, where R&T or play fighting draws and keeps players together. Finally in R&T play perpetrating children use minimal strength so the other children are not likely to become injured. R&T play could be thought of as mock aggression (DePietro, 1981; Hughes, 1991; Humphreys & Smith, 1984).

In most cases children are better at distinguishing between R&T play and aggression than are adults (Pellegrini, 1995). By taking a closer look at children's fighting, this skill can be improved. Each fighting activity is a unique situation. In one situation a teacher does need to refrain from interrupting the fight yet in another situation the fighting should be stopped because the children involved do intend to

hurt each other. By recognizing the differences in R&T behavior and aggression, both adults and kids can benefit (Boulton, 1994).

Both playful (R&T) and aggressive fighting are a regular part of playground behavior. In most cases the R&T play does not lead to aggression. Teachers, parents, and other adults can be comforted in knowing that rough-and-tumble play does not apparently cause greater aggression later in life (Humphreys & Smith, 1987)

Returning to the two behavioral episodes at the start of this section, the children that were involved in the first episode said the behavior was playful. In the second episode, participants saw it as an instance of aggressive behavior. Hopefully the information provided here will assist playground supervisors in making distinctions between R&T and aggression. Michael Boulton is currently designing a program to assist in preventing mistakes in assessing playground behavior (Boulton, 1994).

CHAPTER III

It is evident that play is an important part of children's lives. When debating the importance of play we need to remember that "play is the road to becoming oneself (Levy, 1978, p. vii).

This paper has reviewed research on children's recess behavior. The school playground is a unique setting where children have an opportunity to play. As this review has shown, "recess is one of the few times during a school day that children get the chance to interact with their peers and do things on their own terms" (Pellegrini, 1995, p.181). This review has shown that the unique setting recess provides is an area in need of continual research to reveal ways in which recess is an important, non-expendable, part of the school day.

This paper reflected on some of the positive aspects of recess on children's intellectual/cognitive, psychological/affective, and psychomotor/physiological development. Recess behavior has been found to be a critical component of children's social and cognitive development. Recess itself can be viewed as an environment with a vast variety of educational

opportunities. As research on recess continues, these opportunities will become more explicit (Pellegrini, 1995).

This review referred to the national survey of superintendents in the United States, NAESP (Pellegrini, 1995). The author wonders how many superintendents or principals have any first-hand contact with recess. A national survey of teachers and other breaktime supervisors might produce more insight about the benefits and downfalls of recess in schools.

Recess is a time of day many children love. When brainstorming with children regarding what they like about school, this author in more than 15 years of teaching always hears from at least one or more students that recess is their favorite thing about school. In doing this research review, the author got a tiny glimpse of something usually only children recognize, that play is a time of vast learning and that children are highly motivated to partake in it simply because they enjoy it. The childrens' view, that recess is a very important part of a school day, is supported by the authors represented in this research review who have spent years researching the importance of play.

This review has acknowledged that recess, though important, does have areas of criticism. In addressing two

common criticisms of recess, that it is a waste of time and a setting for aggression, this author's intent is to leave readers better informed regarding such criticisms of recess.

In closing, the author would like to remind those involved in decisions regarding whether or not to keep recess in schools to remember that play is a main feature of what it means to be human, and play should not be valued only for its indirect stimulation of cognitive skills and problem-solving (Vandenberg, 1985). The traditional place of recess or playtime/breaktime in the school day needs to be maintained and the wide range of benefits of recess needs to be more clearly understood by teachers, administrators, and parents.

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