

# Give Students Autonomy in the Use of Break Time in Conformity with the Principles of Humanistic Education

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*“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”*  
–William Butler Yeats

**H**UMANISTIC education (also known as person-centered education) is a learning theory based on humanistic psychology, aiming to promote the development of the learner as a “whole person.” Various aspects such as the intellect, social and emotional skills, and artistic and practical capabilities of the student are all important considerations in the humanistic approach to education (Zhang, 2010). It places a great deal of emphasis on students’ choice and control over the course of their education. Students are encouraged to make choices that range from day-to-day activities to goal settings. According to Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology as well as the humanistic learning theory, the primary purpose of education is to train the student to want and know how to learn, and the ability to learn should relate to the fulfillment of other needs (as cited in Xie, 2016).

Break is an integral component of students’ school life and the best opportunity for them to exercise autonomy. Despite its seemingly insignificant weight in the school timetable, the scheduling and management of break time have profound impacts on student holistic development. Ramstetter et al. (2010) argue that break allows the student a time to rest, play, imagine, move, and socialize and a necessary break from the rigors of academic tasks.

From the perspective of humanistic education, the student should be afforded the freedom and autonomy in choosing the content and mode of break time activity. Free activity at break makes a unique contribution to their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. First, exploratory activities occurring during play help children develop intellectual concepts; break makes them more attentive and cognitively more productive in the ensuing class. Second, free activity at break promotes social-emotional growth of children. Through play, they learn essential social skills, such as communication, negotia-

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tion, cooperation, sharing, and problem solving; they also learn how to relax after a period of stressful work and develop other coping skills for emotion management. Equally important is that physical activity at break provides benefits for students' physical well-being. The opportunity for practicing movement and motor skills at break is an effective counterbalance to the sedentary lifestyle of a student (Zhang, 2016).

Students' enjoyment of break is guaranteed in many countries despite the variations in its timing and duration. For example, primary schools in the United States place premiums on student outdoor activity at recess. Typically, the young students have three sessions of recess during the school day, in addition to the lunch break. Each session lasts 20 minutes, during which the children must get out of their classrooms for outdoor activity. In the event of harsh weather, the teacher takes students to the indoor gym for physical activities. In Britain, break time ranges from 10 to 30 minutes and has distinct names at different education levels depending on the varied focuses. In pre-primary and primary schools, it is called play time, with a focus on its functioning of game; In secondary schools, the interval between lessons is named break time --- time for rest. Although there are no structured games for secondary students as for their younger counterparts, they must leave the classroom at break to pursue outdoor physical activities, which may be organized by the students themselves or the school. Break time in Australian primary schools is filled with voluntary physical activities of students. On finishing a lesson, the children rush to the playground for their favorite games, such as playing on a slide, hopscotch, pole climbing, and ladder climbing. There is ample sports equipment in the playground and gym in almost every school. Some teachers join their students in the play. Together, they create a joyful atmosphere in the playground. In Canada, the retired teacher Doyle initiated the Active Playground Movement. Four students were selected from each of the 35 primary and secondary schools to participate in a four-session training program with each session lasting two hours, where they learned to play traditional games such as rope skipping, chess, and hopscotch. The four "trained" students then taught their schoolmates to play these games during break time. The initiative is not only effective in encouraging active physical activity and interactions in students, but also successfully pass on traditional games among them (Modern Education News, 2014).

*Break Time on the School Schedule: Evidence from Basic Education Schools in China* in this issue of the journal gave an overview of issues with break in Chinese basic education schools and analyzed the harms and causes of recess deprivation in students. It is hoped that the article can arouse more attention on the right of the student to rest and free activity at break and the significance of recess for their growth and development (Xu, 2023).

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**Conflict of Interests:** None

**Doi:** 10.15354/sief.23.co237