

Break Time on the School Schedule: Evidence from Basic Education Schools in China

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Abstract: *The mandatory 10-minute break on the basic education school schedule in China is intended to help students relieve fatigue and pressure and refresh their minds and bodies between lessons. However, instructional activities have often taken precedence over its intended purpose. This article described the current state of break time deprivation among Chinese basic education students and analyzed its causes, with a view to arousing more attention to the protection of the right of the student to rest and leisure activities at school.*

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Introduction

THE primary purpose of education is to foster healthy student growth. This fundamental purpose should guide the centering of all school activities (Xue, 2011). A reasonable school schedule is the foundation of desirable educational outcomes. Nevertheless, the fixation with student examination results in current Chinese basic education has caused plural issues that impede student growth and development, such as overly long school hours, between-lesson breaks being filled up with instruction, and the limitation on student voluntary activities other than studies (Wen & Bi, 2023). Such injudicious use of school time has become a severe constraint on the healthy school life of students and, consequently, on their comprehensive development. This study focused on the issues with the recess between lessons in Chinese basic education schools and their causes. We suggested recommendations to promote a more scientific basic education by guaranteeing the right of students to break time.

Status Quo of Break Time on the School Schedule

China has the largest scale of basic education in the world, with estimated enrollments of 0.168 billion in 2022 (Ministry of Education of China, 2022). Chinese basic education universally implements class-based instruction according to prescribed schedules. A typical school timetable includes four periods in the morning and three or four periods in the afternoon, with a 10-minute break between every two periods and a 15-30-minute “big break” in the morning and afternoon, respectively (**Table 1**).

Table 1 shows that Chinese school schedules mandate break time. However, their implementation does not guarantee it well. Teachers may use it to finish class activities. Students at some schools are required to stay mute, stick to their seats, and not do anything irrelevant to their studies during breaks. Certain schools even go to such extremes as to set limits on students’ visits to the toilet (Wen & Bi, 2023).

Break Time Disruptions in Basic Education Schools

Using Recess as an Extension of Class Time

In China, teacher lecturing has been the predominant approach to instruction in the majority of classrooms at the basic education level (Sun, 2006). Teachers may choose to extend their instruction to break time when they fail to fulfill their teaching plan within class time. Some of them make students do after-class assignments at recess (Wang, 2023).

Table 1. A Typical Basic Education School Schedule in China.				
	Primary	Junior Secondary	Senior Secondary	
A.M.	Period One	8:00 – 8:40	7:50 – 8:35	7:50 – 8:35
	Break	8:40 – 8:50	8:35 – 8:45	8:35 – 8:45
	Period Two	8:50 – 9:30	8:45 – 9:30	8:45 – 9:30
	“Big Break”	9:30 – 10:10	9:30 – 10:00	9:30 – 10:00
	Period Three	10:10 – 10:50	10:00 – 10:45	10:00 – 10:45
	Break	10:50 – 11:00	10:45 – 10:55	10:45 – 10:55
	Period Four	11:00 – 11:45	10:55 – 11:40	10:55 – 11:40
	Noon Break (Including Lunch Time)			
P.M.	Period One	2:00 – 2:40	2:00 – 2:45	2:00 – 2:45
	Eyes Exercise	2:50 – 2:55	2:55 – 3:00	2:55 – 3:00
	Period Two	2:55 – 3:35	3:00 – 3:45	3:00 – 3:45
	Setting-up Exercise	3:35 – 3:50	3:45 – 4:00	3:45 – 4:00
	Period Three	3:50 – 4:30	4:00 – 4:45	4:00 – 4:45
	Break		4:45 – 4:55	4:45 – 4:55
	Period Four		4:55 – 5:40	4:55 – 5:40
	<i>Note: There are slight regional variations in the school schedule in China.</i>			

According to Wang’s (2023) survey on class time management by primary school teachers, 64.7% of the teachers polled stated that students could complete learning activities in class, 71.3% of them were not quite satisfactory with their class time usage, and more than half (56.7%) have undertaken prolonged instruction to varying degrees. Along with the researcher’s classroom observations, it was concluded that the extension of class teaching was indeed pervasive. In addition, as per a survey conducted by the Social Investigation Center of China Youth Daily in collaboration with Wenjuan.com, among 1908 parents of primary and secondary school students, 64.7% claimed that teachers of their kids should manage class time better than extend their teaching to break time (Du & Li, 2019).

Imposing Unnecessarily Strict Discipline on Break-Time Activities

Due to the influence of the former Soviet Union’s educational ideas, Chinese basic education emphasizes collectivism in education and the regimentation of school life (Tan & Zheng, 1992). Even at break, students are required to follow strict discipline, being not allowed to talk loudly or walk around freely in the classroom, and being particularly discouraged from leaving the

classroom (Wu, 2021). This deprives students of the rest and relaxation they deserve.

In a 2023 report titled “Be More Considerate of Children’s Needs for the Ten-Minute Break” by Guangming Daily, the statement of a third grader at a primary school in Beijing was quoted: “After making necessary preparations for the ensuing class, I can drink some water or use the toilet but cannot go downstairs or talk to classmates. When I feel really bored, I either day-dream aimlessly or imagine a fighting game in my mind.” A mother of an eight-year-old boy said, “Every child in the school must follow the rule of ‘being mute on entering the classroom and starting learning on sitting down, and they will even be penalized for talking to peers from other classes on the way to the toilet at break.” She saw such strict rules as literally a torture to her lively and outgoing son (Deng, 2023).

During an investigation by *Legal Daily* into break time deprivation in students, a parent from a primary school in Nanning City of Guangxi reported that students were prohibited from playing games like basketball and table tennis on the playground during break, and their activities were limited to areas near the classroom. A parent in Zhengzhou City of Henan said that their child was only allowed to get some drinking water and use the toilet during the 10-minute recess and spent most of their break time in the classroom except for having a little walk in the corridor and doing the outdoor setting-up exercise at “big break” in the afternoon. The restriction on student break-time activities also occurred in some secondary schools. The class teacher reprimanded a student’s father for his son’s violation of the school regulation by playing basketball at break, which they thought could possibly cause an accident. The teacher reminded him to educate his kid on break-time behavior (Wen & Bi, 2023).

Harms of the Loss of Break Time to Basic Education Students

Impairing Student Psychological and Physical Health

According to relevant psychological research, adequate free activities and social interactions are preconditions for student psychological development (Yang, 2023). The class-based teacher-led instruction in China per se renders little room for free interaction. The loss of break time has further exacerbated the dearth of opportunity for voluntary activities and peer communication among students. This imposes dire challenges on their psychological state.

According to the *Report on National Mental Health Development in China 2021-2022* and the *Blue Book of National Depression Disorders 2022*,

14.8% of Chinese adolescents were subject to the risk of depression, a much higher percentage than that of adults; 50% of those diagnosed with the depression disorder were students from various education levels. Moreover, the number of teenagers who have had psychological counseling experiences is climbing year by year. Low-spiritedness, a short concentration span, learning fatigue, and an increased frequency of interpersonal conflicts are among the main mental issues with students. Psychotherapists emphasize that the restriction on student free activity at break and their sedentary behavior are unfavorable to the refreshment of mind and body, leading to concentration difficulties in the next class. Over time, students may grow weary of learning (Wen & Bi, 2023).

The lack of free activities at break is not only detrimental to students' mental and psychological health but also to their physical fitness. It contributes to the risks of issues such as obesity and myopia in children and adolescents (Zhang et al., 2022). In some extreme cases, students deliberately reduced their intake of food and water due to the constraints on toilet visits. There has been a report circulating that a seven-year-old girl contracted urethritis after only a few months of school, and upon parents' closer examination, she admitted to forgoing drinking water all day at school to reduce visits to the toilet (Deng, 2023).

The Infringement of the Student's Right to Freedom of Action

The pursuit of freedom is a fundamental human right. Children and teenagers have a natural tendency for free activity. Freedom of action is vital for their growth and development, playing crucial roles in fueling innovative thinking, enhancing self-directed learning ability, cultivating an independent mentality, and developing a sense of social responsibility in them (Zhou, 2006).

Injudicious use of break time and overly strict discipline on student voluntary behaviors not only violate their natural tendency but also hinder their social and emotional development. Students need peer interactions, such as playing with classmates, which give impetus to the development of social and emotional skills. The loss of break time deprives students of opportunities to interact with peers, leading to unmet emotional needs and negative feelings such as loneliness and anxiety (Xiong, 2019).

Children have an innate preference for play, and it is a paramount avenue for understanding and exploring the world. Professor Tian at the China Youth Research Center underlined the importance of a moderate number of voluntary activities in school life. In his view, the seemingly insignificant break has unique educational value in addition to its refreshing function. During the short ten-minute recess, the student learns a lot about

others and society through casual chats with peers and becomes more motivated to know more of the world; they develop their judgments on the right and wrong and awareness of social norms via “group gossips;” they can experience positive emotions such as mutual support, understanding, and friendship as well as negative emotions such as sadness, embarrassment, disappointment, and anger in playing games with classmates, which can improve their emotional intelligence and social skills. Content knowledge learning alone cannot lead to the attainment of these skills (Deng, 2023).

Causes of Break Time Deprivation among Basic Education Students

Improper View of the Teacher-Student Relation

According to the traditional view of the teacher-student relationship, the teacher plays a dominant role in education, holding an authoritative position as the sole controller of the educational process; in the meantime, the student must follow the teacher’s instructions and directions without reservation (Gao, 2020). In a teacher-dominated classroom, the teacher tends to overemphasize order and discipline with disregard for the fundamental rights of the student, such as the right to rest and recreation (Wang, 2021). Also, this unequal relationship between teachers and students finds expression in the teacher’s mistrust in students’ ability to manage themselves. They justify their arbitrary control over students’ behaviors by assuming that self-regulation is beyond the latter’s capabilities (Ji, 2021).

A Narrow Notion of the Purpose of Education

A scientific notion of student growth emphasizes student holistic development in academic, physical, emotional, social, and more dimensions, with a focus on the cultivation of healthy character and key competences in students as the foundation of their future development and the fostering of self-development ability to enable them to adapt to the changing social environment (Jin, 2013). However, in practice, Chinese teachers tend to narrow the purpose of education to achieving student academic attainments. As a result, they attempt to improve student academic performance by maximizing learning time and intensity by every means, including using break time for extra class instruction and written exercises by students (Li, 2012). This practice has ignored the negative impact on student learning efficacy and mental and physical health. Over time, with accumulated pressures and fatigue, students lose interest and motivation in learning. In addition, a portion of schools pay no attention to personal differences between students and the consequential

diversity of their needs and learning styles. To pursue uniform standards and targeted performance, they place students in one unified framework of requirements, depriving them of free activity and self-development opportunities (Luo, 2017).

An Unscientific Education Evaluation Framework

Meaningful education evaluation is a process of scientific assessment of educational activities, procedures, and an outcome based on prescribed educational objectives and is intended to provide evidence and directions for the further improvement of education quality (Yuan & Huang, 2006). Nevertheless, academic results-focused (or simply test scores-focused) evaluation systems are still pervasive in Chinese basic education schools, which is one of the main factors in break time deprivation. Exam results-focused evaluation leads to the teacher's blind faith in the student's learning load and disregard for the importance of scheduled breaks. A frequent practice in some schools is that teachers use break time to deliver problem-solving techniques to increase students' test ability (Ma, 2020). It may appear to be effective in enhancing student academic performance instantly, but it has negative effects on their long-term development, both physically and psychologically.

Furthermore, when school progression rates and exam results of students become the only evaluation criteria for education administrators, teachers inevitably neglect assessment of other education outcomes, such as physical and mental health, creativity, and social skills. In this context, students' break time can be easily sacrificed due to the teacher's primary consideration being their test ability rather than holistic development (Yang, 2023). Also, such one-sided evaluation systems exacerbate inter-school and inter-student competitions. Amid the ever-intensifying competitive climate, schools and teachers naturally place more pressure on students, requiring them to utilize all available time, including intervals between lessons.

The School Schedule is Incompletely Managed

Effective education management provides guarantees for the efficient operation, high quality of education, and optimal education outcomes of the school (Ma, 2014). At the basic education level, break time is an essential component of a student's school life. Rest deprivation among students is partially attributable to insufficient school management.

In schools that place emphasis on student academic learning and see break time as irrelevant to learning, the right of the student to rest is often neglected, and there is a lack of supervision over teachers' handling of recess on the school schedule (Ma, 2020). Without an effective monitoring device, the teacher may arbitrarily set restrictions on students' activities at break,

Table 2. Government Papers on Guaranteeing Student Break Time at School.

Years	Titles of Papers	Relevant Points
2007	Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening Physical Education to Boost Physical Fitness of Children and Adolescents (State Council of China, 2007)	A minimum of one hour of physical exercise every day is compulsory for each student.
2008	Action Plan for Myopia Prevention in Primary and Secondary Students (Ministry of Education of China, 2008b)	The teacher must finish classes in time and is not allowed to use student break time for other purposes.
2009	Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Strengthening the Regulation of Primary and Secondary School Operation (Ministry of Education of China, 2009)	Formulate regulations to specify student rest, study (including self-study), exercise time as well as forms of activities and homework; organize large-scale examination to rectify misuse of student break time; encourage the involvement of parents and the community; reduce the on- and off-campus schoolwork burden to guarantee the right of the student to rest.
2010	Strategy on the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 (State Council of China, 2010)	Reaffirm the guarantee of one-hour on-campus physical exercise minimum for primary and secondary students.
2011	Regulations on the One-hour On-campus Physical Exercise of Primary and Secondary School Students (Ministry of Education of China, 2011)	Mandate the implementation of the state's regulations on the one-hour on-campus physical exercise of primary and secondary school students; make compulsory the 25–30-minute physical exercise at "big break" in the morning.
2021	Notice on Strengthening the Management Work of Student Physical Health and Fitness (State Council of China, 2021)	Reiterate the importance of one-hour on-campus physical exercise minimum for primary and secondary students.
2021	Regulations of Minors Protection at School (Ministry of Education of China, 2021)	Remove unnecessary restrictions on freedoms of reasonable in- and out-class communication and games as well as outdoor activities on the part of students.

using safety concerns as excuses. In addition, no training or guidance on break-time activity design is provided to teachers to increase their skills in creating colorful and intriguing games for their students. As a result, students may stay idle during breaks, unable to acquire effective relaxation. In sum, the evaluation of the quality of break time has not been incorporated into school management, making it difficult to spot and correct relevant problems in a timely manner (Liu, 2011).

Recommendations on Guaranteeing the Right of the Student to Rest at Break

The central education authorities of China have devoted a great deal of attention to the issues with break time in basic education schools. In recent years, the Ministry of Education has released a series of government papers (**Table 2**) in an effort to rectify the aforementioned issues and support healthy student development.

Drawing on the spirit of these government papers, recommendations on the regulation of break time on the school schedule are proposed as follows:

Formulating Specific Measures

Schools should create age-specific schedules that take account of the characteristics and needs of various age cohorts and provide adequate rest time for them. It is advisable to extend the between-lesson break to 15 minutes from the current 10 minutes so that students can have reasonable amounts of time for relaxing activities aside from visiting the toilet and taking refreshments. The 30-minute or so physical exercise at “big break” should be guaranteed every morning; each individual student should have one hour’s physical exercise minimum at school every day (Ministry of Education of China, 2011).

Facilities should be provided to students for undertaking a variety of break-time activities rather than confining them to the classroom and corridor. They should be allowed to visit the playground, gymnasium, library, art classroom, and other places at break and “big break” so that there are various options open to them, including but not limited to physical exercise, reading, and artistic activities.

Teachers should properly plan instruction content and progress and improve in-class teaching efficiency in order not to extend class activities to break time. As a result, teachers can prevent students from studying continuously for a long time (Ministry of Education of China, 2008a).

Strengthening the Supervision of the Use of Break Time

There should be supervision mechanisms in place to oversee the school’s and teachers’ management of break time. The educational department can deploy specialized personnel to investigate the implementation of the prescribed schedule among schools and engage other stakeholders, such as parent committees and student representatives, in the supervision effort. Regular evaluation of student break-time activity is needed to ensure that schools’ practices are in conformity with relevant national standards and child protection laws. The evaluation results should be coupled with an assessment of school performance.

Public opinions should also have a place in the supervision mechanism. Schools may engage professional social forces in creating and managing school schedules to ensure optimal use of break time. Public opinions can help oversee students’ enjoyment of rest and free activity at break with the assistance of information technology. For instance, an online questionnaire survey is workable for investigating the satisfaction of the neighborhood with the school’s organization of break-time activities.

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