

RECESS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION?

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Abstract

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There is a belief within the school system that there comes an age in which time for recess is no longer necessary for school children. Yet I question the assumption that middle school students do not have needs similar to elementary school students. It seems troublesome to claim that a student in fifth grade both benefits from and needs recess, but a child in sixth grade does not. My interest lies in this seemingly arbitrary shift and the consequences of moving away from allotted recess periods. In order to gain more perspective on this shift, this project uses qualitative analysis to ascertain a middle level student's perspective on and desire for the inclusion of recess in middle school.

Upon analysis of questionnaires and interviews, it is clear that, although middle level students express interest in various aspects of recess, they do not desire a recess period in their school day. Rather, middle level students prefer to spend less time at school and more time in places of increased freedom and autonomy. Therefore, teachers and administrators have a responsibility to integrate aspects of recess, such as physical activity, social interaction and freedom of choice, into daily classroom and school activities.

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Introduction

If one asks a child what their favorite part of the school day is, one will undoubtedly encounter an answer similar to “Recess!” or “Lunchtime!” The enthusiasm for those precious moments of social encounter and active play is undeniable in any child. Therefore, it seems quite appropriate that the educational system has accounted for these needs by allotting time for recess and lunch. However, inherent within this system is a belief that there comes an age in which time for recess is no longer necessary for school children. Depending upon the school district, this shift will occur somewhere between grades five and seven.

Yet I question the assumption that middle school students do not have needs similar to elementary school students. It seems troublesome to claim that a student in fifth grade both benefits from and needs recess, but a child in sixth grade does not. My interest lies in this seemingly arbitrary shift and the consequences of moving away from allotted recess periods. Is it simply for the sake of convenience and scheduling or do middle school aged students no longer want or need recesses?

As Dr. Crail of Kent city schools in Ohio observes, “Middle school students ‘may look pretty grown up, but on the inside they crave some of the same things third and fourth-graders want’” (Coeyman 1999 p. 13). In this project, I attempt to gain an understanding of the middle level students’ need for active play and socialization as it occurs during recess.

Literature Review

It is certainly no secret that most schools intend to implement the best practices which exist for the benefit of students. In an elementary school there are many examples

of these practices, one of them being the inclusion of recess. The research relating to the field of active play and recess seems to suggest several reasons supporting the inclusion of recess in an elementary school timetable. These reasons include physical health and wellness, developmental growth and academic growth.

Physical Health and Wellness

Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Tabak and Flegal's (2006) research portrays all too clearly the desperate situation surrounding childhood obesity across America. According to the study, America has seen an eight point rise in the percentage of either at-risk for obesity or obese children since 1999. At the completion of their study, they found that approximately thirty-seven percent of American children aged six to eleven fit the status of obese or at risk for obesity.

Thus there has been a surge of research encouraging administrators and teachers to consider physical activity a top school priority. While many researchers directly reference the obesity crisis, much of the research surrounding recess and physical activity simply calls for an increase in activity levels because of the basic health and wellness benefits of living an active lifestyle. Therefore, elementary schools have been called upon to provide significant and intentional opportunities for activity throughout the school day.

Exercise Levels

According to Jeanetta Riley, "The human body needs movement to stay healthy and well" (2007 p 41). In 2005, the Institute of Education Sciences performed a national study of American public schools to determine exactly how healthy and well America's students were. The study examined the Institute of Medicine's recommendation of an "energy balance" approach which emphasizes the balance between calories taken in and

calories spent. By surveying both the physical activity levels and types of food sold at American schools, the study attempted to gain an understanding of the health of America's public school children (Parsad 2006).

Looking specifically at physical activity levels, the study found that among public elementary schools, eighty-three percent of schools allowed daily recess for both fifth and sixth grade students. The percentages increase as the grades decrease, with eighty-eight percent of schools allowing daily recess for first grade students. Among those schools which offer daily recess, the majority provide between twenty-one and thirty minutes of recess per day for first through sixth grade students (Parsad 2006).

The provision of twenty to thirty minute recess periods is congruent with the National Association for Sport and Physical Education's suggested recess time periods (Kahan 2008). Beighle, Le Masurier and Pangrazi (2006) provide further support for the inclusion of a twenty to thirty minute recess with results indicating that even a fifteen minute recess period results in a significant amount of physical activity. Specifically, Beighle et al. found that boys spend seventy-eight percent and girls sixty-three percent of their recess time engaged in physical activity, therefore concluding that, "recess is an important part of physical activity for youth and should be a part of each school day" (2006 p. 518). This conclusion is confirmed again by Kahan's research which reveals that physical education alone provides an insufficient amount of physical activity for children, thereby proving the necessity of recess.

To address this need for physical activity, Kahan (2008) presents several recommendations, such as providing daily recess periods of at least thirty minutes regardless of grade level or academic rank, arranging recesses for multiple and longer

periods of time to promote more moderate-to-vigorous activity, changing activities periodically during recess, not replacing physical education classes with recess periods, grouping children by grade levels, providing a variety and appropriate quantity of play materials and space, creating spaces to play games, ensuring that adult supervision is non-intrusive to play, encouraging teachers to model physical activity, and integrating a unit on recess games into a physical education class.

Developmental Growth

Yet recess is valuable not only for its physical health implications. Regarding developmental growth, research also indicates that active play is essential for developing students' cognitive abilities. Kahan (2008) references Strong, Melina, Blimkie, Daniels, Dishman and Gutin's (2005) conclusion that more physical activity and better physical fitness levels are associated with better academic performance.

During play, children also learn to communicate with their peers, both conversationally and using various forms of diction such as exposition, which uses language to explain and expose information, as well as persuasion, which uses language to present arguments and positions (Riley & Jones 2007). Additionally, play situations allow children to use language to make meaning of themselves, their peers and their world; ultimately, Riley asserts, referencing research by Perlmutter and Burrell (1995), that the setting for play nurtures the language development of children naturally.

Specifically, Riley and Jones found that girls typically involve themselves in cooperative and conversational play with smaller groups of same sex peers. For girls, the small group games offer opportunity for increased practice in conversational skills and general verbal communications. Contrastingly, boys typically engage in play that is

dictated by rules and often involves larger groups of same sex peers. These types of rule-oriented games afford boys the opportunity to practice cooperation and compromise as well as to work individually with the goal of finishing a task. Additionally, rule-oriented games also instill motivation to follow the set of rules for the game.

Similarly, Hruska and Clancy, alluding to research by Gardner, Hannaford and Piaget, assert that “movement has long been recognized for its value in the development of cognitive skills in young children and for supporting learning” (2008 p. 13). Howard and Hill’s (2008) work provides a similar conclusion relating a child’s play and problem-solving skills as well as correlating play with future school success.

Social Development

Social development is certainly an aspect involved in developmental growth and active play is also a crucial part of a child’s social development. Once a child attends school, play is primarily a social or group activity (Riley & Jones 2007) in which teachers are typically either not present or passive observers (Howard & Hill 2006). This basic absence of adult presence allows children to test and understand social norms and adjust to peer relationships (Riley & Jones 2007).

In one Montessori grade-school, the social implications of recess took the unique form of an entire culture of fort-building. Using the natural resources of the nearby woods, students created forts and established an entire social system based on the fort culture.

In doing so, they developed and influenced each other’s reasoning about such moral principles as benevolence, justice and reciprocity. Fort play was unpredictable, immediate, exciting, and fun, a brief window of opportunity among hours of mostly adult-inspired activities and expectations, in which these children were free to manage their own lives and interact with each other on their own terms . . . Play is a powerful medium for children to construct their own understandings because it integrates the many and various sides of human beings. When

children play, their activity touches all areas of their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (Powell 2007 p. 24, 29).

Academic Growth and Learning

Besides being a factor in the cognitive and social development of children, the effect of recess on classroom attentiveness and behavior provides another possible motivation for allowing time for recess. Research indicates that allowing children the opportunity to be active provides a break from the routine of a typical classroom and may increase a student's motivation to learn while also improving focus and concentration abilities (Hruska & Clancy 2008 p. 13; Kahan 2008 p. 27).

Anthony Pellegrini and Catherine M. Bohn (2005) term this need for periodic breaks from instruction the Cognitive Immaturity Hypothesis. Essentially, this hypothesis states that a child's ability to use advanced cognitive processes is less developed than an adult's ability; however children do not perceive themselves this way and may complete an advanced task, even if it is not completed according to an adult's standard. Consequently, children feel a sense of success over this achievement which benefits the child in learning complex skills. However, in order to prevent interferences to the cognitive processes required to complete these activities, children need unstructured or playful breaks between sustained periods of instruction.

Ultimately, Pellegrini and Bohn conclude that recess serves an educational purpose in its ability to prolong children's ability to effectively use cognitive processes in learning. Citing anecdotal evidence from East Asia (Stevenson & Lee 1990), Pellegrini and Bohn argue that a child's ability to focus on the work in class is significantly increased when periods of instruction are brief and separated by unstructured breaks. This philosophy of several East Asian schools carries through from primary school to high

school. However, in contrast to this literature regarding recess and learning, Pellegrini and Bohn's own research involving American school children found no connection between physical activity and academic learning or attention.

Recess in Middle School

All of the above research relating to recess and physical activity in elementary schools makes it quite apparent that recess is an integral and beneficial aspect of a child's school day. However, once a student reaches the middle level grades recess is no longer included in the school timetable. It seems that this discrepancy is not only unfair, it is unhealthy for the students in America's middle schools.

Physical health is still a major concern for middle aged students. According to a government statistic, seventeen percent of children from the ages of six to seventeen were obese in the year 2005 (Childstats.gov). By the age of eleven, students may be entering a middle school sixth grade class and possibly remaining in middle school until the age of fourteen. Therefore, middle schools have a responsibility to address the issue of obesity and physical health facing its students.

However, according to the sample in Young, Felton, Grieser, Elder, Johnson and Lee et al.'s (2007) study, on average, middle school students were exposed to only thirty minutes of physical education per day for a year and the Surgeon General's recommended daily activity time is sixty minutes almost every day of the week (Stellino & Sinclair 2008). This discrepancy leaves middle schools with an unmet need regarding students' physical activity.

Additionally, middle school is similar to elementary school in that students are continuing to develop both cognitively and socially. The complex social relations

occurring in the middle school realm are just as crucial to navigate as those in elementary school, yet excluding recess means students have no discretionary opportunity to continue developing the skills necessary to cooperate with their peers, accommodate their thinking to fit another's perspective, develop conversation skills, or practice navigating the social rules of life.

Finally, students in middle school are still developing their ability to think abstractly and conceptualize information. Most students will just be entering Piaget's fourth stage of development, Formal Operations, and are yet to have the cognitive abilities of an adult mind. Therefore, it is essential that students in middle school also receive sustained breaks intermittently throughout instruction as suggested for elementary aged students by Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) and Kahan (2008).

Conclusion

While the research supporting recess in elementary school is overwhelming, research relating specifically to similar themes in middle school is less vast. However, there are certain barriers to implementing recess which must also be addressed. First and perhaps most significant are the pressures faced by teachers and schools to meet federal and state accountability standards. As a result, many schools reduce recess time in order to provide more time for classroom based learning and test preparations (Blackwell 2004; Parsad 2006).

Second, recess requires funding which may not be available or accessible to certain schools or school districts. According to Young et al.'s (2007) survey of physical education specialists, the greatest barriers were lack of space, insufficient staff development and low priority within the school's goals. Stellino and Sinclair (2008) also

acknowledge the hindrance of equipment shortages, lack of playing space, limited variety of equipment and weather implications.

Third, looking specifically at physical activity in middle schools, Young et al. (2007) found that while fifty percent of schools surveyed allowed free play before school and sixty-four percent allowed free play during lunch, when it came to extra-curricular activities for female students in particular, only about five percent of female students participated across the schools. Based on this research, it may be assumed that there is a lack of perceived interest among middle school students when it comes to extra-curricular opportunities for active play.

Research Questions

It remains that the primary focus of the research centered on play and activity is the elementary school environment. It is explicitly clear that play and vigorous activity is essential to the overall health, development and academic well-being of children and middle school adolescents are certainly no exception to the rule. Although there are certain barriers to implementing recess, the needs of middle school students should far outweigh the cost of these issues. So my question remains, what is the reasoning behind excluding recess from a Middle School student's day?

There are many angles this question could be addressed from, but I am interested in the specific needs and desires of the middle school student. Since adolescents are not simply older elementary students or younger secondary students, school practices should not attempt to fit middle level students into such a mold. Rather, the best practices at a middle school should reflect the unique characteristics and needs of middle level students. Therefore, my question becomes, according to an adolescent perspective, what

is the role of recess in a middle school? Additionally, this paper attempts to discover the types of physical and social activities middle level students prefer to engage in and the perceived level of interest among middle level students regarding physical and social activities in the school environment.

Methodology

This is a qualitative analysis research study. Qualitative analysis is a method of research involving an active participant observer who collects data based on observations, interviews and various other forms of interaction with participants.

Since my research questions surround the adolescent perspective of recess, this study's methodology must work toward the end of obtaining a personal perspective. Qualitative analysis, then, with its focus on human interaction works is an appropriate methodological approach since my research questions aim toward data based on subjective opinion and personal needs or desires.

As a future educator, I am passionate about providing the best possible learning scenario for every student. Thus, this research project stems from a desire to make middle school an active and engaging site for learning that is developmentally responsive to the diverse and unique needs of students at the middle school level. Additionally, since my sample includes students in the classroom where I will be student teaching I have a vested interest in discovering valuable and insightful information which will benefit the educational experience of these students.

Sample

The data obtained through this research study is in the form of interview recordings and documentation and questionnaires completed by participants. There is one

primary sample providing this data: students in seventh grade at a middle school in which I am student teaching. These students represent a fairly homogenous group, being primarily Caucasian and in the middle class of society. Of the students who filled out a questionnaire, three were of a non-majority population; of the interview candidates, one was of a non-majority population.

Students were selected based on parental consent, student consent and student interest. Consent was obtained through signed consent forms and interest was determined through personal conversations and teacher recommendations. Four students were chosen to be interviewed and thirteen students volunteered to fill out the questionnaire. Questionnaires were examined for thoroughness of student response in order to be eligible data. All thirteen questionnaires provided eligible data.

Instrumentation

Data was collected through administered questionnaires which centered on the role of recess in an adolescent's school day. Students completed the questionnaire at their school during the school day and were given ample time to complete the questionnaire. Questionnaires were administered only to eligible students. Eligibility was dependant upon parental consent, student consent and student interest; these were ascertained by consent forms given to students prior to the study's commencement. The appendix includes a questionnaire sample.

Data was also collected through interviews with the data sample listed above. Interviews were conducted during school hours at the school the student attends and were audio recorded to ensure accuracy and validity. All students consented to interviews in addition to expressing considerable interest in the interview. Interest was ascertained

through length of answers on the questionnaire, observations of students, teacher recommendations and personal conversations.

Interview questions centered on the theme of recess and included its implementation or exclusion and specific recess activities. The appendix includes examples of interview questions; however, interviews depended on specific responses by individual students and thus, not all interview questions were predetermined. Student responses were based primarily on prior experiences with recess in elementary school as well as student opinion regarding the possible inclusion of recess in middle school. The students involved in this project do not currently engage in a designated recess period at their middle school.

Data was triangulated by comparing interviews, interview transcriptions and questionnaires. Additionally, the sample provides a congruent data source of middle level students at one school; many of these students also experienced similar recess experiences in the elementary schools of this district. This data source ensures that each student's recess experience has been relatively similar, promoting a congruent perspective and consistent basis for interview questions and responses. Consequently, the data is somewhat individualized to a specific group of students. However, despite this individualization, the themes ascertained in this study pertain to the general concept of recess implementation and experiences.

To protect the identity of all participants, each is given a pseudo name. For example, the school is simply termed middle school and students are named Student 1 or Student 5. This method is employed throughout the study in order to ensure the utmost amount of protection for source samples.

Procedures

Following the questionnaire administration, responses were analyzed for specific themes. These themes include activities occurring during recess, frequency of recess, enjoyment of recess, typical leisure activities among adolescents, implementation of recess or the absence of recess. Additionally, questionnaires were analyzed for length of response and perceived student interest in order to gain insight into potential interview candidates.

Once interviews were completed, all interviews were transcribed and data was again analyzed for themes. Interview themes include activities occurring during recess, frequency of recess, enjoyment of recess, typical leisure activities among adolescents, implementation of recess or the absence of recess. Observations made from interview data were shared with students in order to ensure that perceptions made during analysis were accurate.

Data

Questionnaires

Data was collected using two methods: written questionnaires and verbal interviews. The initial questionnaire asked several questions relating to the inclusion, exclusion and implementation of recess. Students were asked to give written responses. In total, questionnaires were administered to thirteen students in the seventh grade. All thirteen students completed a written answer to all required questions on the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained one optional question; six students provided a written response to this question.

As a result of the format of certain questions on the questionnaire, several students provided responses which did not correspond to the intent of the question asked. Therefore, it may be assumed that these students misread the question as it appeared on the questionnaire, rendering their responses unreliable. In total, the questionnaires provided thirteen reliable responses on questions A, B, and C; eleven reliable responses on Question D; nine reliable responses on Question E; eleven reliable responses on Question F; and six reliable responses on Question G. These irregularities as well as all responses are recorded in Table 1.

Table 1: Data Summary

Questionnaire Summary		Total Number Completed
Completed Questionnaires		13
Question A	Do you believe recess should be included in middle schools? Yes or No	13
Question B	Does a recess period affect your day in any way? How?	13
Question C	List a positive aspect of recess.	13
Question D	List a negative aspect of recess.	13
Question E	List a positive aspect of excluding recess.	13
Question F	List a negative aspect of excluding recess.	13
Question G	Please list below anything else you would like me to know regarding your thoughts about recess.	6
Unreliable Data	Explanation	Unreliable Responses
Question A		
Question B		
Question C		
Question D	No Response	10
Question E	Response does not match the question	1, 3, 4, 8
Question F	Response does not match the question	1, 8

Question G	No Response	1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11
Reliable Data		Total Number of Reliable Responses
Question A		13
Question B		13
Question C		13
Question D		12
Question E		9
Question F		11
Question G		6

In response to the first question, students were asked to state their opinion regarding whether or not recess should be included in middle schools. Eight students responded with “no” and five students responded with “yes”. However, Student 13 who supported the inclusion of recess in middle school clarified her answer by writing, “Not exactly recess, but like a 25 minute period of time that we can just hang and cool with friends that might not have the same classes as you.”

When asked if a recess period affects their day at all, eleven students replied that, “yes, recess does have an effect on their day.” Students 1, 8, 9 and 11 all stated that recess affects their relationships with friends. For three of those students, recess was a positive factor in their relationships, resulting in getting to “see my friends more” (Student 1), “loosen up and talk with friends” (Student 9), and “hang out with our friends” (Student 11). Similarly, when asked to list a positive aspect of recess, nine out of the thirteen responses indicated that time with friends is a positive aspect of recess inclusion. Student 8 particularly emphasized that recess allows students time to “talk to your friends.”

Similarly, when students were asked to state a negative aspect of excluding recess, five out of eleven responses indicated that the lack of social time would be a

negative factor. Student 3 wrote that students would “be getting more hyper until the end of the day when school get out and *we get to be with friends*” (emphasis mine). Student 13 echoes that sentiment, stating that without recess, “kids wouldn’t have a time to call ‘theirs’ which they need!”

However, when asked question A, student 8 presents an entirely different perspective, stating that recess affects her day “...because it is kaos and because almost ALL the drama happens during recess. Recess is really hard to be supervised and lots of people get hurt.” Many other students offered similar perspectives in response to Question D (List a negative aspect of recess), stating “people could get bullied easier and people could get in fights” (Student 2), “More kaos and problems occur” (Student 3), “All the drama happens at recess” (Student 8). In total, six out of twelve students listed social conflicts or bullying as a negative aspect of recess. Additionally, when asked to list a positive aspect of the exclusion of recess, three students listed a decline in bullying and troublesome behavior. Student 2 wrote “we wouldn’t get bullied by 8th graders,” and Student 7 simply responded, “no time for trouble.”

Of the eleven students who claimed that recess does affect their day, four students related this effect to physical activity. Students 5, 6, and 9 expressed positivity toward the idea of a recess period, stating that during recess, “I can stretch” (Student 5), “people express their hyperness outside the classroom” (Student 6), and “it helps us to loosen up...” (Student 9). When asked to list a positive aspect of recess, four students stated physical activity as the primary factor. Student 2 stated, “We can have fun and be active.” Students 6 and 9 related the physical activity to necessity, writing that recess periods “let people get out all their jitters” and “it gets the wiggles out of us.”

Similarly, in response to question F, which asked students to list a negative aspect of excluding recess, five students responded that the lack of physical activity would be a negative factor in the exclusion of recess. Students stated that “We wouldn’t have time to run around and be active” (Student 2), we would be “still jittery in class” (Student 6), “then we would be getting more hyper till the end of the day when school get out...” (Student 9), and “kids get antsy” (Student 12).

However, Student 3 expressed concern that students who participate in recess come back into class “and once they get riled up they can’t stop.” In response to question D (List a negative aspect of recess), other students expressed similar concerns, writing that “after it is finished we are still hyper even when we get into class” (Student 9), we are “still loud and hyper when back in class” (Student 6) and “[recess] gets ya hyper and hard to refocus” (Student 13). Additionally, when asked to list a positive aspect of excluding recess, four students linked the exclusion of recess to being “calmer in class and not thinking of the recess to come” (Student 6), or “we would not be so hyper coming into class after lunch” (Student 9), and “kids wouldn’t get hyper” (Student 13).

Of the remaining students who agreed that recess affects their day, three students related this effect to their cognitive development. Student 7 wrote that recess “gets you off track...” and later wrote in response to question D that recess “gets you out of the school zone.” In response to question E (List a positive aspect of excluding recess), Student 12 wrote that excluding recess would mean that “more school work gets done” and Student 10 wrote that without recess, “teachers get more time to teach.”

However, when asked to list a negative aspect of excluding recess, Student 7 stated that the exclusion of recess means “you don’t get a break from school” and listed

“gives you a break” as a positive factor for including recess. Students 10 and 12 also wrote that recess “gives your brain a rest and fresh air makes you energized and happier” and, with recess, “I would probably be in a better mood.” When asked to list a negative aspect of excluding recess, Student 10 explains that “kids are tired and bored by the end of the day” and Student 11 stated that students would have “less time to clear our mind.”

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with four students. These four students each completed a questionnaire, thus the interviews reference their specific answers to the questionnaire. Though each student was asked slightly different questions, all interview questions were centered on the inclusion or exclusion of recess, specific recess activities, and personal recess experiences.

Student 1 did not support the inclusion of recess in middle school, initially for the simple reason that high school students are not given time for recess, therefore, neither should middle school students. When asked if she thought recess was for little kids, Student 1 answered, “Yes.” She explained that, although “it is time for people like to talk...you have lunch and in between classes” [to talk].

During her years in elementary school, Student 1’s experience with recess was generally positive. When asked what she typically did during recess, Student 1 replied, “Um, I just talked with my friends.” Later, when asked specifically what was positive about recess, Student 1 answered, “Um, well, you could like run around and talk to people.”

However, despite the positive experience described, Student 1 believed that “recess is best in elementary school and...the best scenario would be for recess to end in

fifth grade and fifth and sixth graders get to go home earlier than kindergarten through fourth graders.” When asked why she would rather leave school early than have more time with friends at the school, Student 1 replied, “Well, because you can like talk and stuff and the school doesn’t allow you to do some things that at home you would be able to do.”

As a clarification, Student 1 was asked, “So that time where you could do whatever you wanted was more important to you than having a time with your friends at school?” To which she replied, “Well, most of my friends live nearby me, so I could just go outside.”

Student 1 also made references to physical activity occurring during recess. She stated that some people played basketball during recess in elementary school; currently, she plays basketball during the lunch break at her middle school. Additionally, when asked to explain what was positive about her recess experience in elementary school, Student 1 replied, “Um, well you could like run around. . .”

Additionally, Student 1 made references to the effect of recess on cognitive development, stating that when she was in elementary school, one enjoyable aspect of recess was that there was “more time like in between classes where you don’t have to worry about homework and stuff like that.” When asked if she could still focus on classes occurring at the end of a day without recess, Student 1 replied that, yes, she did believe she could still focus.

Student 8 also believed that recess should not be included in middle school. Student 8’s reasoning mainly focused on the “drama” or social conflicts that may occur during a less-supervised period such as recess. She stated, “It’s already chaos in the

hallways. I can't even imagine what it would be at recess. And, um, recess at our other schools, there's lots of drama and I was happy that there wasn't recess because we wouldn't have drama anymore."

Student 8 explained that it was important to her to talk with friends, especially since there was not ample time allowed in class for social conversation; however, she stated that "during lunch it was really loud so you couldn't really have a conversation with your friend even if they were like right across from you." When asked if that experience has been similar in middle school, Student 8 replied, "Ya, it's even louder." She later elaborated, stating, "And, um, at school, we just have like a limited amount of time where we can talk and sometimes we can't always talk, we're stuck. And it's really like hard to get into good conversations when there's lots of people, so..." Additionally, "like the passing periods, five minutes is just enough to *get* to our classes. But talking like makes it harder to get there on time, so it's not like all about talking to your friends during the school day."

During her elementary recess experience, Student 8 indicated an interest in physical activities such as tetherball and four-square. However, these activities were often interrupted by the social conflicts occurring during recess. According to Student 8, social conflicts resulted in more focus on "what was going on in my social life" rather than physical activities.

Social conflicts also affected Student 8's perception of cognitive development. She explained that after a recess period filled with social conflicts, "we'd go back into the classroom and we wouldn't really be in a good mood for learning." Later, Student 8 agreed that she would rather come to school and focus on learning alone, then return

home and focus on having social time with friends. She affirmed this later by stating that in middle school, “you start needing to be more responsible and, like, going to recess kind of upsets your brain, so you start thinking all fun, and then it’s really hard to get back into learning again, but with younger grades, they need to get their energy out, even in sixth grade.”

Similar to Student 1 and Student 8, Student 7 also believed that middle schools should not include a recess period. She claimed that middle school students do not have a need for physical activity, therefore, recess would be a waste of time. During her elementary school recess experience, Student 7 engaged in physical activities such as kickball and soccer. When asked what the most positive aspect of her recess experience was, Student 7 said “it was just time to hang out with your friends and play games I guess.” Student 7 also mentioned social conflicts as a negative aspect of recess. She stated that “kids used to get into fights kind of and, ya mostly that.” Another negative aspect of recess according to Student 7 is that “it like takes a while to like, once you get into the classroom, to settle down and everything and then also like during the winter or anytime it rains, you get muddy and stuff like ya.”

When asked if she thought the passing periods were a long enough break for middle school students, Student 7 replied yes. She explained that “if the classroom is far away, I usually just go there. But, um, like during block, um, since we just have to go back to the same classroom we just see other friends who have block and stuff and we hang out and talk for five minutes.”

Student 7 stated that she enjoys the fact that “at school you have like any friends, but not all kids are at my house and everything.” However, she also agreed that she

would prefer to have less breaks during the school day in order to get out of school earlier.

Student 9, however, stated that he believed recess should be included in middle school. He believed that five minutes of passing period is not long enough to meet his need for social interaction. Student 9 stated that talking to his friends helps him to “like relax a bit I guess.” He went on to explain that being more relaxed aided in his concentration and learning abilities.

Student 9 did appreciate the social interaction occurring during lunch, stating that “I usually just sit around a table and talk with all my friends.” Additionally, Student 9 engaged in social interaction during physical activities such as basketball. He explained that “usually we talk while we’re playing basketball ‘cause we’re not like really playing a game....there’s like a huge line, so we have time to talk altogether.”

When asked what was positive about his recess experience in elementary school, Student 9 referred to “hang[ing] out around the bars there and just play[ing] around.” When asked to clarify whether this time was more focused on social or physical activity, Student 9 said he probably spent more time talking than engaging in physical activity.

Student 9 was asked if he would rather have more time during school to talk with his friends and get out of school later, he replied “Ya, sort of.” In his explanation, Student 9 elaborated on his hesitancy, stating, “Cause some people like to get out of school earlier cause they like can do stuff. Like when I get out of school I usually like play football or I’ll just hang out at a friend’s house.” Student 9 later personalized his answer, stating that he would prefer to “Probably, uh, get out earlier.”

Analysis

Within the data collected through questionnaires and interviews, three strong themes emerge surrounding the inclusion or exclusion of recess and specific recess activities: social interaction, physical activity and cognitive development. Students supported their arguments for the inclusion or exclusion of recess in middle school using one of these three themes.

In the questionnaire, more students believed that recess should not be included in middle school. Of the four students interviewed, three stated that recess should not be included in middle school on their questionnaire, and one stated that recess should be included in middle school. However, that student changed their opinion by the end of the interview. That being said, it is discerned that most middle school students do not want a recess period in middle school. The following analysis provides a glimpse into the reasons underlying this opinion and what specifically about recess middle level learners do not want.

Social Interaction

It is clear through the questionnaire and interviews that middle school students deeply value time for social interaction with their peers. This was listed repeatedly as a positive aspect of including recess in middle school. Similarly, when asked to list a negative aspect of excluding recess, five out of eleven students responded that the lack of social time would be a negative aspect.

During the interviews, every student referred back to an experience of social interaction occurring in elementary recess periods. Each student remembered these times as a positive experience. However, when asked to choose between more time with friends

at school and a longer school day or less time with friends and a shorter school day, all students chose a shorter school day with fewer breaks.

This choice seems to be connected to two repeatedly made associations regarding school and recess. First, students, in both questionnaires and interviews, associate recess with a lack of supervision and as a chance to be bullied by peers or older students. Though over half of students listed social interaction as a positive aspect of recess, approximately half also listed bullying and social conflict as a negative aspect of recess, indicating a significant concern regarding unsupervised periods of time.

Secondly, students associated time spent in school as academic in nature and not meant for social interaction. This association will be addressed further later; however, it is apparent that despite the high value placed on social interaction, most middle school students would rather not have a recess period included in their day.

Physical Activity

Many students also referenced physical activity as a positive aspect of including recess. For every student interviewed, physical activity was a positive factor in their elementary school recess experience. Activities such as tetherball, kickball, soccer, basketball and foursquare were mentioned as enjoyable forms of physical activity. However, students overall agreed that middle school aged students no longer require a time set aside for physical activity. In fact, many associated such a concept with immaturity.

Additionally, students repeatedly referenced their existing opportunities for physical activity during lunch breaks as sufficient for providing the needed amount of physical activity. Typically, the students who were physically active during recess in

elementary school also participate in physically active games during lunch such as basketball or volleyball. Perhaps more importantly, students explained that they rarely spent all their time during elementary school recesses engaged in purely physical activity. Rather, it was a combination of social interaction and activity, often resulting in more conversation than actual activity. Even for male students, social interaction was consistently stated as more of a priority than opportunities for physical activity. According to middle level learners, the need for social interaction and conversation seems to outweigh both the need and desire for physical activity. This observation leads into a discussion of the role of conversation and social activity in middle level classrooms which will be addressed later in this paper.

Cognitive Development

Interestingly, many students associated opportunities for physical activity as an interruption to their learning cycle and a hindrance to their ability to focus. Students consistently listed factors such as increased levels of hyperactivity and decreased levels of focus or concentration as negative factors in the inclusion of recess.

Ultimately, this association relates back to the choice students made regarding a shorter school day with fewer breaks. Students seem to view the school day as academic in nature and requiring a level of focus and concentration that is not perpetuated by a recess period. Students prefer to spend their time at school focusing on school work and their time at home focusing on leisure activities, specifically social interaction with friends.

Implications

This project began with a question: what is the role of recess in a middle school according to an adolescent perspective? Students responded to this question in a variety of ways, but essentially provided an answer that centers on students' desires to avoid bullies, exercise increased autonomy and responsibility, engage in fun and social physical activities and finally to be socially interactive in developing peer relationships. While middle school students express interest in many aspects of recess such as physical activity, increased autonomy and personal choice and social interaction, students also clearly stated that recess is an elementary idea and therefore belongs in the elementary school realm. At their stage of development, middle school students desire their own space and their own time; a designated recess period during the day does not meet this need because it is school mandated and designed.

However, though middle school students do not desire a recess period, their perspective regarding recess provides significant insight into the daily experiences of middle school students. These experiences and perspectives provide valuable information to teachers and administrators of middle school students who seek to increase their students' learning and create positive educational experiences for middle level students.

According to students, a fear of bullies and social conflicts is a negative detractor in terms of student interest in recess in middle school. It is certainly no secret that bullying is a major phenomenon in American schools and the issue affects large numbers of students on a daily basis. This study simply confirms the findings of countless others, reinforcing to teachers that the role of a positive, caring and attentive adult is always needed during each moment of a child's school day.

In middle schools particularly, teachers do not have the responsibility of supervising a recess period. However, restrooms, stairwells, bus stops, lunchrooms, hallways, lockers and gyms may become an open invitation for bullies to attack their victims. Therefore, middle school teachers and high school teachers alike must make it a priority to be purposefully present in areas of schools that are not frequently visited by adults.

Additionally, middle school students seem to associate recess with immaturity and therefore, in their disinterest in a recess period, demonstrate their desire to enter into a phase of maturity and young adulthood. In the classroom therefore, students should be given opportunities to demonstrate their increasing maturity and adolescence through leadership activities and increased autonomy.

Teachers can implement these types of opportunities in a variety of simple and manageable ways. For example, involve students in creating a set of collaborative classroom rules; allow students to self-assess their progress in academic, social and behavioral standards; invite students to lead their peers in reenactments, group projects or campaigns; involve students in planning and implementing all-school activities or projects such as dances, fundraisers or community service projects.

Though many students expressed an aversion to recess as experienced in elementary school, almost every student listed the physical activity of recess as a positive experience. Additionally, many students referenced the physical activity occurring during lunch as a positive experience. From these responses, it can be ascertained that middle level students do still enjoy physical activity. Perhaps more importantly, they still need this physical activity as evidenced by nationwide research. Therefore, middle school

teachers and administrators must find ways of incorporating activity into the school day without having a specific recess period.

For example, continuing to provide activities at lunch such as volleyball and basketball provides opportunities for physical activity without referencing the elementary notion of recess. Additionally, using stations, investigations or experiments in the classroom and field trips outside the classroom are positive ways of integrating activity with content. Hruska and Clancy (2008) provide more practical, applicable ideas for integrating activity into the classroom through simply, daily movement games and review activities.

Finally, though middle school students indicate a desire to focus on cognitive activity at school and social interaction outside of school, middle school students continue to display their natural tendencies toward socializing and conversation throughout their adolescent school days. Rather than fight against this natural desire, middle school teachers must learn how to harness the tendencies toward interaction in order to increase student learning.

Ultimately, learning is a social activity, so a student's natural tendency to converse and discuss essentially promotes their own learning. To put it simply, middle level learners set their teachers up for success. However, the challenge lies in monitoring the conversations and directing students toward discussion topics which promote and expand content learning. This challenge brings up a question for further research: how do middle level teachers appropriately and effectively moderate and guide discussion and social interaction around content areas?

Conclusion

Though middle school students may seem rowdy and uncontrollable, perhaps as though they could use a few solid minutes of outdoor physical activity, the consensus among middle school aged students is that this is not only unnecessary, it is detrimental to their well-being as learners. Middle aged students believe that recess, though a valid opportunity for quality social interaction, is also an opportunity for older or more aggressive students to bully others. Additionally, middle school aged students believe that a separate recess period works to shift their focus from curriculum to leisure time and any attempt to regain that focus and concentration is time-consuming and difficult. Additionally, middle school aged students believe they are at a phase of maturation which no longer requires the elemental principles of recess; rather, they are young adults who should be expected to focus throughout the school day, surviving simply on the social interaction of lunch breaks and passing periods.

However, the basic desire for social interaction and enjoyable physical activities such as team sports is highly visible throughout the data of this study. Therefore, it remains that teachers of middle aged students stand to fight a losing battle in their attempt to squelch the natural tendencies of the middle aged learner to interact with their peers and engage in movement. How, then, do teachers of middle aged learners best incorporate conversation into their own praxis and how should its inclusion be monitored in order to ensure students are maintaining focus and expanding their learning. Additionally, what role does movement and physical activity have in the content area classrooms of middle level learners? These questions remain as opportunities for further research and investigation.

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Appendices

Instrumentation Samples

Interview Questions

What do you feel is the purpose of recess?

When do you think recess should be removed from a student's day? Why?

What is/was your personal experience with recess?

List some positive aspects of including recess.

List some positive aspects of excluding recess.

What do you do during recess?

What activities do you do for fun or leisure?

Questionnaire

Do you believe recess should be included in middle schools?

Does a recess period affect your day in any way? How?

List a positive aspect of recess.

List a negative aspect of recess.

List a positive aspect of excluding recess.

List a negative aspect of excluding recess.

**Recess Survey
Middle School
Grade 7**

1. Do you believe recess should be included in middle schools? Yes or No

2. Does a recess period affect your day in any way? How?

3. List a positive aspect of recess.

4. List a negative aspect of recess.

5. List a positive aspect of excluding recess.

6. List a negative aspect of excluding recess.

Please list below anything else you would like me to know regarding your thoughts about recess. (You are not *required* to answer this question).