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Administrators' Reasons to Provide or Withhold Recess

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Administrators' Reasons to Provide or Withhold Recess

by

Elyse Marie Benamati

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the State
University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Science in Education

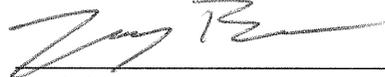
December, 1 2010

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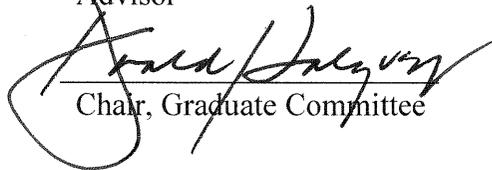
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Abstract

There is controversy in the field of education over the decline of recess in the United States of America. This thesis examines and includes what recess is, the history of recess and its current trend of decline, and the benefits and troubles of recess. In an attempt to explore the possible explanations for the decline of recess, this thesis also reports data gathered from interviews with administrators who have the authority to provide or withhold recess.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The issue of whether recess is needed by school-age children and should be a relevant part of the curriculum in schools is a controversial topic” (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001, p. 221). Whether an individual considers recess as a necessary component of elementary school or not, the trend of a decline is evident. According to Eva Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Teresa Bilello (2005), nearly 40% of the nation’s 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess.

Demographic disparities have been noted in this topic as well. A nationwide study (Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009) on how students in grades first through fifth spend their time at school found that 39% of African American students did not have recess versus 15% of White students, 44% of children living in poverty versus 17% of those not living in poverty did not have recess, and that 25% of children scoring below the mean on standardized tests versus 15% of students scoring above the mean did not have recess.

Exactly when and why schools began to remove recess is a point of contention. While some groups put all the blame on the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (Henley, McBride, Milligan, & Nichols, 2007, p. 56), others state that school systems began cutting back on recess in the late 1980s, and that the trend only accelerated after the passage of No Child Left Behind (Jarret & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009, p. 66).

There are many reasons as to why a considerable lack of recess in children’s daily school life may be a problem. As examined in the review of literature which can be found in the second chapter, there are many benefits of recess to students’ development. In addition to the indication of the benefits of recess it has been shown that these specific benefits are unique to recess. Therefore, once recess is eliminated or reduced from students’ school agenda, so are the unique

benefits to those students' development. However, there are also many valid concerns over providing recess. These troubles of proving recess have only been proposed, there have been no studies examining whether these challenges justify the decision to provide or cut recess.

The question that I propose to examine has to do with the decision to provide recess or to withhold recess. Why do administrators, who have the authority to provide or withhold recess in their schools, make the decisions that they make?

The rationale behind this question is simplistic but practical. There have been assumptions stated as to why administrators decide to reduce the time for recess (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). However, no studies have been found examining the opinions and justifications of these individuals. By examining the knowledge of those with the authority to provide or reduce recess, it can be decided how much they know about the benefits and strategies of recess. Therefore it can be determined if this information needs to be more developed.

In order to properly examine the topic of recess, it is necessary to first define and distinguish the terms used. Several terms used frequently on the topic of recess are unstructured time, free time, recess, and play. While initially these terms seem very similar and perhaps may be used interchangeably, they actually have clear definitions and uses that can and need to be distinguished.

The terms unstructured time and free time can be used interchangeably because they have the same meaning. This vocabulary indicates a time when "children are allowed to choose their activities...and degree of social interaction" (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 15). While the students are able to make their own decisions, they may be "watched over by the protective though generally unobtrusive gaze of supervising teachers" (Powell, 2007, p. 21).

The various uses of the term recess do not always indicate the same meaning. In a broad sense, the term recess refers to a break during the school day set aside for children (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2001, p. 3). The term recess for the purpose of this thesis indicates a break during the school day when children are also given free time. In fact, “a key component of recess is that it is unstructured and undirected” (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 15). The aspect of unstructured time is a critical feature of recess. Currently the term recess is used in schools and students’ schedules to signify a break from school work; however, it is very possible and likely that the teacher leads or plans a structured activity. That does not fit our definition of recess because it is not free time for the students; it is merely a different type of teacher-led activity.

The term recess may also designate a time where students can be physically active and be outside. Besides missing the concepts of free time, this definition ignores that recess may be beneficial to students even when it is held indoors. From a study done by Anthony D. Pellegrini and Catherine M. Bohn, results showed that recess held indoors with a lack of physical activity still has a positive influence on children (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005, p. 15). Recess, in this thesis, indicates a break for students during the school day when children are given unstructured time, and it may be implemented indoors or outdoors.

The word play specifies a form of activity where the participant “recreates the world and comes to understand it” (Weininger, 1979, p. 5). This term also indicates free time where the individual is active in the decisions of what to do with the time. The term play, with its rich history in research, also refers to self-chosen activities that lead to processing knowledge and learning about oneself as well as the surrounding environment. Some work has been done to incorporate play into school curriculum, such as play centers, play-based classrooms, drama

skits, and learning through exploration (Frost et al., 2001, p. 296). The importance of play and its benefits have been well established, while simultaneously the time devoted to recess is on the decline. This seems to show a disconnection between play and recess.

The terms unstructured time, free time, and recess can be used interchangeably so long as there is an understanding that recess indicates more than a break from school and includes unstructured time. The terms play and recess cannot be used interchangeably and have to be distinguished. This is because play may occur outside the school environment while recess cannot. Recess is an opportunity to provide play during the school day. Therefore, though play is a very important and well-researched topic, this study will focus on recess as play in the context of school.

It is a significant problem that while recess is being cut from students during the school day, the individuals responsible for that decision are not getting the chance to express their perspective. If administrators are given the opportunity to justify their decisions as to why they provide or withhold recess in their schools, more may be done to encourage providing recess. Not only that, more may be done to create strategies to overcome the struggles that these individuals face in making the decision to provide recess. As shown in the following chapter, it is evident that more action needs to be done in obtaining the perspectives of administrators on this topic.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature on Recess in Schools

While professionals of education may feel that the controversy of recess, among many other controversies within the field, is the least of priorities, it is a topic that has received much attention yet not much action. The continued decline of recess has been a cause for concern and has yielded many investigations.

An essential part of the establishment of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play is the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child*. As stated on this organization's website, the 31st Article in the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child* states that children have "the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (American Association for the Child's Right to Play, 2010).

The thought that schools may not hold this right as a priority has caused concern in part because of the emerging issue that children experience less play at home as a result of changes in communities and parental supervision (Frost & Wortham, 2001). Children often go home and watch television or movies instead of engage in play activities (Reumann-Moore & Sues, 2006). Other authors are more concerned that children are receiving less free time at home because of the "rise of institutionalized, adult-dominated, after-school programs and the over-scheduling of children's free time" (Powell, 2007, p. 21). The amount of time that kids actually play outside, or even inside together, has continued to decrease (Warner, 2008). It has been established that free time is a right of each child, and these children are not receiving free time in other contexts.

Coverage

The SUNY College at Brockport provided the resources and references examined while researching this topic. Articles and books within the Drake Memorial Library catalog were used,

as well as the university's online databases. Specifically, ERIC (EBSCO) and JSTOR were searched for studies that explored recess in terms of its definition and what it involves, examined the benefits of recess, looked at the possible reasons for recess to be cut, and observed the trend of decline were included in this review of literature.

With this approach to examining the literature, it is imperative to be open-minded and critical. For example, some groups who are concerned over the loss of time devoted to recess have put entire blame on the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001. Henley et al. (2007) said that school districts are "squeezing every minute of the school day to meet the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act" (p. 56) and are cutting recess in order to do so. Similarly, Eva Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Teresa Evanko Bilello (2005) state that schools are eliminating activities deemed unnecessary such as recess "in the aftermath of the No Child Left Behind Act." While I was hesitant to accept these articles because of the bias associated with them, they were still included in this review of literature in order to achieve the examination of multiple perspectives.

There are aspects of the topic of recess that were excluded from this research. One facet of recess that was excluded is studies on health perils in response to a loss in physical activity for students. The focus of this research is not on the physical fitness or physical health of children. However, physical activity and the link to cognitive development also have a strong foundation of research. Therefore, work such as Chomitz, Slining, McGowan, Mitchell, Dawson, & Hacker (2009) was included to acknowledge that there are multiple concerns over a loss of physical activity in students. Another grouping of articles that were not included was ones that provided recommendations that increase the teacher involvement in recess. It has already been established that an important aspect of recess is the omission of the teacher's presence, so these articles did not seem to promote a recess that is truly beneficial to students.

One more portion of recess that was not included is the influence recess may have on students with disabilities. The rationale for this exclusion is that the focus of this literature review was to get an overall depiction of recess in elementary schools. In performing the research on this topic, it was found that there are many studies examining recess and its effects (generally positive) on students with disabilities. In particular, the benefits of recess for students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism and other classifications that involve a discrepancy in social development have been and continue to be measured. This branch of examining the influences of recess has extensive inquiries and studies, therefore is enough for an entire separate topic and is not included in this overview of recess.

Methodology

Anecdotal notes and surveys have been used from school districts to observe a decline in time used for recess in schools. Reports of time actually spent on recess during the school day have also been analyzed. Finally, General observations made daily by teachers, administrators, families, and students have been useful in the realization that students are receiving less time for recess than before.

In response to this concern that students are receiving less free time each day, studies have been done to examine what influence recess has on students. Studies with this purpose use quasi-experimental methods such as studying one group of students for a long period of time, intentionally changing their amount of recess, and observing the differences in the students' behavior. Cross-sectional studies are also done to see if recess has an impact on a certain area, such as achievement on tests.

Historical Context

In the beginning of the 20th century, a widespread commitment to study children led to more research on play. Ideas of democracy and freedom began to be viewed as a necessity in education and were greatly communicated by John Dewey. This may have led to the reasoning that recess should be unstructured time for students to participate in activities of their choice. (Frost et al., 2001, p. 4-22).

When discussing the history of play and the responsibilities of adults, or schools, to provide it, it is essential to include the history of the International Play Association. In 1948 the United Nations proclaimed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and eleven years later in 1959 the United Nations proclaimed the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*. This particular declaration states that “the child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes of education” (American Association for the Child’s Right to Play, 2010). In 1961, the International Association for the Child’s Right to Play formed in Denmark and over forty nations, including the United States, became affiliates. It wasn’t until 1973 when the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play (IPA/USA) was formed. IPA/USA’s primary goals are to protect, preserve, and promote play as a fundamental right for all children. In 1989, the general assembly of the United Nations adopted the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which is a human rights treaty. As previously discussed, Article 31 of this treaty indicates that children have the right to rest and leisure, and to engage in play and recreational activities. (American Association for the Child’s Right to Play, 2010).

It has been stated that a national trend of decline in recess started in the late 1980’s (Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009, p. 66). “In the last 20 years, public education in the United States has been transformed under the pressures of high-stakes testing” (Emery, 2007, p. 25).

While there are many perspectives explaining the reason for this rise in requiring academic excellence, it is commonly believed that “when the job categories in the U.S. economy undergo a fundamental realignment, business leaders move to transform the public school system to sort the nation’s children into the new categories and socialize them to accept these arrangements” (Emery, 2007, p. 25). As our society goes through a change, so do the jobs needed and the requirements of public schools to meet these changes. The relatively recent change in the employment landscape has been from farming and hands-on labor to more office-related careers, which require a mastery of academic skills (Thompson, 2004, p. 28). Perhaps this social phenomenon can partly explain the rise of high-stakes testing in the last 20 years, the change of curriculum in schools, and the decline of recess in response to these demands.

Relevancies to Recess

Recess is not an aspect of schools that can be isolated from the other components of education. Recess proponents see recess as interconnected with other learning experiences. There are quite a few variables and phenomena that are intermingled with this topic. One variable that has an extreme relation to recess is the establishment of accountability of schools and a rise in high-stakes testing. Another aspect of education that has relevance to recess is classroom environments and styles of education. Academic settings have an impact on students’ achievement and perceptions of school.

An additional facet of education that is intermingled with the topic of recess is students’ perceptions of school and their classroom environment. “Most children regard recess as fun and look forward to it. Yet recess not only provides a break, it also adds to the overall quality of a child's school experience” (Chailli, 2001). Larocque (2008) performed a study where she examined the link of perceptions that elementary students had on their classroom environment to

their actual academic achievement. Larocque found that students' perception on their learning environment had a significant positive correlation to their learning outcomes (p. 301).

The Benefits of Recess

Children's rights for play has been officially recognized for almost 60 years at this point. Providing play at school through recess guarantees that each child has this right and this need met. It is not fair that adults' preference for more organized and purposeful activity influences children's greater tolerance for chaos, flexibility, and their need to exercise their own decision-making powers (Powell, 2007, p. 21). Not only that, but providing freedom of choice allows children to practice and subconsciously make use of skills learned in more formal settings (Thompson, 2005, p. 29). When children utilize their right to play and direct their own activities, they are controlling their own learning. For example, students who spontaneously experiment how slippery a floor is by running, sliding, and bumping into other students or objects seem to be poorly controlled. However, those very students are experiencing danger and can comprehend it in their own terms. This way of "studying" the danger of a slippery floor is much more effective than an adult demanding them to stop and using words to explain safety (Weininger, 1979, p. 5).

An area of development that has received much attention in terms of its link to recess has been social-emotional progress. "Recess is the period of time during the day that allows children the opportunity to interact with peers in ways not usually possible in the typical classroom" (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2001). Therefore, the opportunities for social-emotional development during recess are inimitable. Characteristics of social and emotional development that benefit from recess include self-concept, self-esteem, perspective taking, moral development, and peer relations (Frost et al., 2001, p. 233-234). As children play with each other during recess, they learn what behaviors are

expected and acceptable in their society. Opportunities of free play with limited adult interference provide a chance for students to explore acceptable behaviors among their peers (Riley & Jones, 2007). “Students permitted to play freely with peers learn how to resolve conflicts” (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 20).

Although recess may not always incorporate physical activity, the times that it does show much benefit to the physical development of the child. In addition to better health habits and conditions, physical movement is necessary for the growth and development of the mind as well (Riley & Jones, 2007). There has been a strong link between physical activity and memory in children, as well as a significant relationship between students’ academic achievement and physical fitness (Chomitz et al., 2009, p. 34). If recess were to be provided on a regular basis and children had the opportunity to be active, their physical development would benefit as well as the cognitive benefits in response to physical activity.

Recess is cognitively challenging. “It requires attention, and so it sharpens our senses. It both demands and inspires mental dexterity and flexibility” (Chmelynski, 2006, p. 13). In one way, recess provides an opportunity for development in cognitive skills. Studies have shown that activities during recess lead to growth in the cognitive skill of executive function. The executive functioning skills are also known as the self-regulation abilities, such as inhibiting inappropriate impulses, shifting from one task or environment to another, managing time, and initiating activities (Warner, 2008). While the cognitive development of executive functioning skills is intertwined with social development, it carries over to the use of self-regulation skills in all areas of life including academics.

Cognitive development benefits from recess because this free time provides a break from academic challenges. Breaks during periods of sustained cognitive work reduce cognitive

obstruction and maximizes learning and achievement gains (Toppino, Kasserman, & Mracek, 1991). Not only that, it has been found that “memory and attention...is improved when learning is spaced out rather than concentrated. Recess provides breaks during the day which the brain can ‘regroup’” (Jarett & Waite-Stupianksy, 2009). Recess is an efficient means by which students can claim the benefits of free time.

The Impact of Recess on the Classroom

Many studies on recess and the influence on students have been on their abilities to attend to academic activities and their classroom behavior. “Recess appears to be optimal in fostering children’s attention to classroom activities” (Holmes, Pellegrini, & Schmidt, 2006, p. 742). Studies that examined groups of students over a period of time, manipulated the time devoted to recess during their school days, and observed changes in their behavior have found that “children became more fidgety and less attentive when recess was delayed” (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). Another study by Pellegrini (2005) found that children were more attentive to classroom activities after recess than before.

Recess has also been identified as an opportunity for students to expand on their knowledge gained from the classroom. What has been learned in the classroom can be processed and enhanced on the students’ own terms during recess. The thought behind this is that the non-evaluative, lower-stakes nature of recess in terms of student performance helps students to avoid the “right answer fixation,” a mind-set that limits creative potential (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Bilello, 2005).

Another aspect of recess that extends children’s learning is the opportunity for stimulation of the senses of smell, touch, taste, and the body’s sense of movement through space versus most activities in the classroom that only require a couple of the body’s senses. During

recess, children increase imagination, creativity, discovery, reasoning, and manipulative skills (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988). Being creative allows students to connect between one area of learning and another, which extends understanding. Recess allows students to be creative and imaginative on their own terms.

“The school playground provides a key naturalistic context in which to study children” (Leff & Lakin, 2005, p. 475). What these authors are indicating is that observations of children are most insightful when they can behave the way they choose. In fact, these kinds of observations of student behavior “provide very useful diagnostic and learning information” (Pellegrini, 1989, p. 24). Recess provides an opportunity for teachers to learn about their students in ways that would be difficult to observe in the formal setting of a classroom.

The Proposed Troubles of Providing Recess

There are multiple proposals as to why recess has not been seen as a keen aspect of school curriculum. The proposal most commonly referred to first is that there just isn't enough time in the day. The accountability of school districts has been considerably raised with the use of high-stakes testing and incentives to improve academic programs. In response to the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Science announcement of a grant competition, “schools are organizing schedules so that instructional time is maximized and noninstructional time, such as recess, is minimized” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005, p. 13).

Another proposed reason as to why recess is cut is because of injuries and a lack of supervision (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2001, p. 4). It has also been mentioned that negative social experiences arise during unstructured activities. While many of these concerns are valid and are potential reasons to not provide recess to students, none of these have been quoted from the exact individuals who make

the decision to provide or withhold recess. In other words, these proposals are mere suppositions made by past authors. To determine the real problem and struggles of providing recess, information must be obtained from the administrators who make that very choice.

Gaps and Recommendations

An aspect of recess that needs to be examined is administrators' opinions of recess. Currently, it is only being assumed why they decide to provide or withhold recess. What importance of recess do these individuals believe in if they decide to provide recess? Why may they decide to reduce recess in their schools? What struggles do they face in making this decision? One way to improve the situation of declining recess is to find out the source of its elimination in the first place. This can be done by finding out administrator's viewpoints on recess.

Chapter Three: Application

This research was an initial investigation to better understand the reasons for which administrators provide or withhold recess. The interest was in learning how the decision to provide or withhold recess for students during a school day is made by the individuals who have the authority to make that decision. As examined in the literature review in Chapter Two, recess across school districts in the United States of America is being given regularly less time during the school day in schools even though recess provides unique benefits to students. Finding out the justifications to either providing recess or cutting it will contribute to general knowledge about what needs to be done to keep recess in the daily schedule of students.

It is critical to talk with these individuals who are in authority to provide or reduce recess to get their input on the topic of recess. By interacting with those who make the decision to provide or withhold recess, knowledge can be gained on their struggles, achievements, and justifications for their decisions. Also, interviewing administrators will give an insight on what they do and do not know about the activity of recess. The knowledge seeking sought in this research was what those in positions to provide or cut recess know about the topic and why they make certain decisions. The administrators chosen to potentially participate in this study were elementary school principals as well as middle school principals.

The preferred method of gathering the data was by interviews as opposed to questionnaires or surveys, so as not to limit their responses. As John W. Creswell states, “an open-ended response to a question allows the participant to create the options for responding” (Creswell, 2008, p. 225).

Since this research topic of recess is not a sensitive topic, the interviews were held in the schools where the subjects were located for their convenience. Responses were kept by written

notes by the primary researcher. Informed consent was documented and steps were taken to guard the confidentiality of participants' responses. These steps included a numerical ID system where each participant was assigned a number, and this numerical ID was used on the written notes. The only location of the participants' actual names were on the Informed Consent Documents through their signature, and their numerical ID was recorded on the back of their documents. These forms were kept in a locked box throughout the research, and once the data was analyzed and evaluated these documents were shredded.

A needed characteristic of the subjects were that they currently had the authority to provide or withhold recess to students. Ten administrators from various schools in a Maryland school district were interviewed. Each interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol. See Appendix A. The participants' responses were compared in a search for patterns as well as contrasted to find varying perspectives.

Chapter Four: Results

Identifying the demographics of the subjects in this study and the schools they administrate is in order to meaningfully interpret the findings. This is because one of the main purposes of this study is to gain an understanding of what leads administrators to their decisions of either providing or withholding recess to the students in their schools. If the demographics of these administrators and their schools are not taken into account, possible patterns or themes may be neglected or overgeneralized.

Table 1

Demographics of administrators that were interviewed

Administrator #	Administrative Position	Years		Gender	Age Group
		in Position	Years Teaching Prior to Position		
1	School Principal	6-10	0-5	Male	30-39
2	School Principal	0-5	6-10	Female	40-49
3	School Principal	0-5	6-10	Female	30-39
4	School Principal	0-5	0-5	Female	30-39
5	School Principal	6-10	6-10	Male	50-59
6	School Principal	0-5	0-5	Female	40-49

Note: Experience is reported in ranges to protect the participants' confidentiality.

The administrators who participated in the interviews, as well as the schools they work in, have similarities and differences in their demographics. Refer to Table 1 to see the demographics of the administrators, and refer to Table 2 to learn of the demographics of the

schools they administrate. The school data was obtained from the school district's website, except for the school of Administrator #4. That data was collected from another public reference.

An evident similarity between the administrators was that they have all been in their position for ten years or less, including four of the six being in their position for three years or less. Four of the administrators are female, while two of them are male. Three of the principals are in their thirties, two are in the forties, and one is in his fifties.

There are a few pieces of information that stand out in terms of contrasting characteristics. Two of the administrators have been in their position more than double, and even up to ten times longer than the other principals. Of those two administrators, one of them had never been a teacher in a classroom before.

It is just as important to understand the types of students these administrators work with. In making any decision for their school, the characteristics of the students should be one of the factors they consider. These characteristics can be examined by taking a look at the demographics of the schools. Half of the schools are middle schools that cover grades six through eight. The other half are elementary schools; two of these schools cover Kindergarten through grade five while one covers Pre-Kindergarten through grade five.

Looking at ethnicity distribution, three of the schools had more than fifty percent of their student population with the ethnicity of Caucasian. Two of the schools had almost fifty percent of their student population with the ethnicity of Caucasian. While none of the schools had more than fifty percent of their student population with the ethnicity of African American, three of the six schools have less than ten percent.

Four of the six schools had students with Hispanic ethnicity making up less than ten percent of their total population. All of the schools have students with Native American ethnicity

making up one percent or less of their total population. Of the data collected, four of the schools have less than ten percent of their students who qualify for English Language Learners classification. Three of the schools have less than five percent of their students receiving free or reduced lunch. All of the schools have between five and ten percent of their students receiving special education.

Table 2

Demographics of schools from the school year 2009-2010

School of Administrator	Grade Levels in School	Total Student Enrollment	Ethnicity (%)					Students Receiving Special Services (%)			
			White	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Native American	Not Reported	English Language Learners	Free/Reduced Lunch	Special Education
1	PreK-5	650-660	20-30	40-50	5-10	10-20	<1	5-10	10-20	30-40	5-10
2	6-8	720-730	40-50	30-40	10-20	5-10	<1	<5	<5	20-30	10-20
3	6-8	580-590	80-90	<5	5-10	<5	<1	<5	<5	<5	5-10
4*	6-8	20-30	40-50	40-50	<5	5-10	<5	<1	-	-	-
5	K-5	340-350	50-60	10-20	10-20	<5	<1	5-10	<5	5-10	10-20
6	K-5	540-550	50-60	<5	30-40	<5	<1	<1	<5	<1	5-10

*Data collected from another public resource

Similar to the trend in reviewing the demographics of the administrators, their roles as administrators differed greatly. One of these differences was apparent at the school of Administrator #4. The school of Administrator #4 is a learning center within the district that houses programs which are designed to meet the specific needs of individual students who have difficulty functioning in traditional classroom settings. The students who attend school at this learning center have been assigned to this particular school because their behavioral needs are

not met in their home school. Not that demographic data for Administrator #4's school were not available online. A possible reason for this is that the student population in this school is not as stable as in traditional schools, so the data collected is not a strongly accurate representation.

There are other differences that stand out among the demographics of these schools. One of the six schools has over eighty percent of the student population have the ethnicity of Caucasian. One other school, excluding the school of Administrator #4 because of the low total enrollment possibly skewing the data, has over forty percent of their students with the ethnicity of African American. One school has almost fifteen percent of their total student population having Hispanic ethnicity. This school has almost fifteen percent of their students qualifying for the English Language Learner classification compared to let that five percent in the other schools. Finally, two of the schools have more than twenty percent of their students receiving free or reduced lunch. It is important to keep these demographics in mind while examining the results of this study.

Participating Administrators and their Schools

Defining recess.

How the administrators define recess shed light on what they may have known and may not known about the topic. There are key parts of recess that may possibly be left out in some schools, therefore not truly being recess as defined in this paper. If that is the case, then the students who partake in that pseudo-recess may not truly receive all of the benefits described in Chapter Two. For example, if an administrator feels that recess can be structured time, the students would not be given the opportunity to exercise their decision-making or problem-solving skills.

The range of definitions the administrators held for recess is representative of the various definitions used in circulation. As described in Chapter Two, the term recess for the use of this paper and much of the literature on the topic involves a break in the school day when students receive unstructured, or free, time. Of the six administrators interviewed, Administrator #1 and Administrator #4 were the only ones that mentioned recess as unstructured time. Administrator #1 stated that “recess is free time for students during the day.” While containing the same meaning, Administrator #4 did not use the words unstructured or free. She said that recess is “open gym time for the students or leisure use of the computers if they choose.” The rest of the administrators did not include anything conveying unstructured time or free time in their definition.

Administrator #2 and Administrator #5 both emphasized a similar aspect of recess within their definitions. Administrator #2 stated that recess is “a break in the day for students when they are not doing academic work.” Among other features in Administrator #5’s definition, he also included that it is an opportunity for students to “get ready for the work in the afternoon.” While free time may not be what comes to mind for these principals when it comes to recess, the belief that students deserve a break from instruction is evident in their definitions.

Administrator #3 also recognized the need for a break in the school day, but not specifically a break from instruction. She stated that recess is “a time when students can release energy that builds up during the school day.” As explicitly affirmed in her definition, she believes that the main importance of recess is a time for physical activity. While this feature of recess fits more in the category of a benefit of recess as opposed to the basic definition of recess, she is not the only one who expressed this in the definition. Administrator #5 also said that recess is “an opportunity for students to release energy and get exercise.” Even though he is the only

one who mentioned exercise in his definition, it is yet another example of a benefit of recess being seen as so important in the administrators' perspective that it becomes part of the definition. One final example of a benefit recess that was mentioned was for Administrator #6. She stated that recess is a time when students can "engage in play with friends and interact with their peers in an informal setting." This principal's definition included recess' importance for the students' social development, while the others express the significance of a break of instruction and physical exercise. However none of these four administrators included the necessity of recess being unstructured time in their definitions.

Recess policies.

In addition to how the administrators define recess, the way recess is provided or not provided in a school revealed the significance of recess to the principal. For example, if there was an established block of time in the daily schedule for students to participate in recess, it may be inferred that the administrator of that school held recess as a priority. In contrast, if recess is not held as a priority in the mind of the principal, this priority should be reflected in the school's policy. In addition, since the decline of recess is a concern to some, it is beneficial to examine what kinds of policies regarding recess are established.

When recess is provided.

Administrator #1 explained that there is a policy regarding recess established in her school, yet admirably admitted that it is "not regularly analyzed." The policy for his school is that teachers are to provide at least twenty minutes of recess, which as defined by him is free time, for their class at some point each day. Similarly, these teachers are required to provide a certain amount of instructional time for each subject. The teachers of this school are given a lot of freedom in terms of when to schedule these required blocks of time throughout the day.

Students who attend the schools of Administrator #2 and of Administrator #3 experience the same recess policy as each other. This may be explained by the fact that these are both traditional middle school settings. In these two schools, recess “is a part of the lunch break” (Administrator #2). The students at these schools have thirty minutes built into their school day devoted to lunch and recess. This block of time is split up based on grade level, so all of the sixth graders eat with sixth graders, seventh with seventh, and eighth with eighth. Students are to eat their lunch first, and once they are finished with their lunch they are allowed to go outside where recess is routinely provided. Therefore, as Administrator #3 stated, “if students eat their lunch in five minutes they get twenty-five minutes of recess.” Both administrators stated that most students want to be in recess and finish their lunches quite quickly in order to maximize their time outside.

Like Administrators #2 and #3, Administrator #5 has ensured that the students of his school receive an appropriate time of recess by building in a block of time in the daily schedule. However, while Administrator #2 and Administrator #3 have recess built in as part of the students’ lunch time, Administrator #5 has it built separately and after the students’ lunch time. The students get thirty minutes of lunch, and then the Kindergarteners through the second graders get twenty-five minutes of recess; third graders through fifth graders get thirty minutes of recess. The difference in time provided is a result of the scheduling limits.

As already mentioned, the school of Administrator #4 is a unique school in that it serves as a learning center for students who’s behavioral needs are not able to be met in traditional classroom settings. Prior to Administrator #4, the students attending this facility were provided a very “structured recess, if that makes sense” (Administrator #4). After their lunch, the students used to rotate through three seven minute stations that involved them participating in different

activities, such as card games or board games. One of the reasons why their recess was so structured was because it had to be held in the classrooms. The gym was never available at that time, and, because of the past behavior of these students, going outside is not an option.

Based on the lack of interest and participation from the students in the past, Administrator #4 (who was a teacher at this school prior to becoming an administrator) changed the schedule and recess policy. She revised the class schedule to hold recess at a time when the gym was open. The students have a choice of open gym time or free computer usage.

According to Administrator #6, “teachers used to get to choose when to provide recess.” For the last couple of years, this administrator made some changes to incorporate recess school-wide on a daily basis. Recess is now an extension of their lunch time. As soon as students are finished with their lunch, they may go outside. After thirty minutes of lunch, all students attend recess outside for an additional ten more minutes. When asked why she made the change, she stated that “when teachers have the freedom to choose when recess is to take place, there is less ability to monitor where students are in the building and when.” She also mentioned that teachers tended to let recess take place for longer periods of time than she would have liked.

Recess as an incentive for desired behavior.

Schools of Administrators #2 and #3 allow teacher withhold recess as a consequence of classroom behavior. “Lunch detention means that they eat lunch with a teacher, or in the office if severe enough of a consequence is needed, and do not have the opportunity to engage in recess” (Administrator #3).

Administrator #4 also explained that “this free time is used as an incentive for students to do well in the morning.” There is a school-wide behavioral management system that removes individuals’ recess time based on three levels of inappropriate behavior. While recess is taking

place in the gym or computer room, study hall is also taking place in a classroom for the students who have lost recess time. Administrator #4 added that “in an ideal world, recess would not be taken away. But here at *school x*, we see it as a privilege.”

In contrast, all students participate in recess at the school of Administrator #5. He states that the only students who get it taken away are “students who have extreme and multiple violations during recess time.” In those cases, they stay inside for half of recess and then are allowed to go outside. Based on this recess policy, it is evident that time spent for recess is a priority to this administrator and the right children have to free time gets recognized.

Adult supervision.

At the school of Administrator #2, the principal herself and her two assistant principals supervise the recess activities outside, while a rotation of three teacher “duties” supervise the students in the cafeteria. Similarly, teachers at the school of Administrator #4 also share and rotate duties of providing supervision during recess. In contrast, Administrator #3 explained that the recess supervisors and the lunch monitors, a total of four staff members hired for this specific position, rotate through being in the cafeteria and being outside on a weekly basis. This is similar to the adult supervision established of the school of Administrator #5, which involves five hired positions that also rotate from lunch monitoring to recess supervision. In contrast to all of the schools, Administrator #6 allows parent volunteers to provide the supervision during recess.

By examining the policies of recess in each of these schools, information can be learned on the perspectives of administrators on the topic of recess. It is evident that recess is significant to each of these administrators by recognizing the fact that each school has a policy where students are to be provided a sufficient amount of time in recess each day. However, some administrators have taken extra steps to ensure that each child receives that requirement, such as

Administrator #5. Others still believed recess to be valuable, but also saw its utility as an incentive of good behavior from the students.

Administrators' needs in order to provide recess.

Examining administrators' perspectives on recess includes what is needed for them to provide it. A principal may wish to incorporate recess in the daily schedule of the students of their school, but may not be able to if their school does not possess the necessary resources. Therefore, it was valuable to learn from the administrators themselves what they feel is needed in order to offer recess.

Table 3

Administrators' needs in order to provide recess

Administrator #	Area/Space	Adult Supervision	Time	Equipment
1	X			
2		X	X	
3	X			X
4	X	X		
5		X	X	X
6	X	X		

Each of the administrators was able to list off the needs in order to provide recess quickly. Refer to Table 3 to review the responses of the participants. Administrator #1, Administrator #3, Administrator #4 and Administrator #6 stated that an area or space for the students to “run around” (Administrator #2) is essential. Administrator #3 even joked that “no

rain” was a requirement in order to provide successful time devoted to recess. While not entirely serious, this participant brings up an excellent point. While discussing recess, all of the administrators are referring to outdoor recess. As covered in Chapter 2, recess indoors can be just as valuable and beneficial to students. However, because it is more challenging to supervise students in a limited space, indoor recess is often viewed as not successful. This raises the question of whether administrators would still be willing to provide recess if outdoor recess was not an option. Administrator #4 would be exempt from this question because recess in that school is only indoors.

Contrary to accepted wisdom.

Much literature on the debate of recess, in particular from pro-recess authors, assumes that administrators are at major fault for the decline of recess because they are pushing for more time in school to be devoted to instruction. For example, In response to the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Science announcement of a grant competition, it was stated that “schools are organizing schedules so that instructional time is maximized and noninstructional time, such as recess, is minimized” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005, p. 13). However, of the six administrators that were interviewed for this study, only two mentioned that time is a needed feature in order to be able to provide recess. This seems contrary to accepted wisdom of the decline of recess.

In addition to an area or space for students to engage in recess and having time to provide recess, these administrators also listed adult coverage and equipment as needed facets in order to successfully provide recess to their students. Administrator #4 was very appreciative in the teachers “respecting my request to use their teaching time and devote it to free time for the students.” In terms of the equipment, Administrator #5 stated that “imagining all of the students

in an open space with no balls or playgrounds or other equipment leads to me thinking of the large line that would be at my door.” What he means is that if students did not have proper equipment to play with, they would get themselves into trouble and be sent to the principal’s office. However, this is also in contrast to the beliefs discussed in Chapter Two that children will rise to the challenge and problem-solve if given the freedom to do it.

Administrators' knowledge on benefits of recess.

In making any decision, one of the many strategies employed is to analyze the pros and cons of the decision. Deciding to provide or withhold recess is no exception. Therefore, gaining knowledge on what administrators feel are benefits of recess as well as struggles with recess helps to gain an understanding on why they’ve made the decision that they’ve made.

In responding to the interview prompt, the six administrators listed similar categories of benefits that students receive when participating in recess. Refer to Table 4 to review the principals’ responses. These categories include socialization, a release of energy for the students, an opportunity to practice free choice, and meeting special needs of students.

When discussing students being able to socialize as a benefit for recess, Administrator #4 summed it up by saying that during recess “students are able to interact with the peers that they are not in classes with.” On the topic of students being able to release energy during recess, it was said in terms such as “burn energy that’s pinned up” (Administrator #4), “burn off energy” (Administrator #5), and “release of energy” (Administrator #2, Administrator #6). In addition to that, Administrator #5 stated that because the students are able to burn off energy the “kids are more settled after,” while Administrator #4 added that they “can focus in class better.” When free choice was discussed as a benefit to students from recess, Administrator #1 said that “students can think for themselves,” and Administrator #5 also stated that they “are given the

chance to practice choice-making skills without teachers dictating them.” Of all six participants, one brought up students who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and their need for a break in a day that includes a chance to release energy.

Table 4

Administrators' knowledge of the benefits of recess

Administrator #	Socialize	Release Energy	Free Choice	Special Needs
1			X	
2	X	X		
3	X			
4	X	X		X
5		X	X	
6		X		

While the benefits that these principals stated are very true and valuable, a lot of benefits that have been found in a review of the literature (as described in Chapter 2) were not mentioned. The view that recess is essentially part of children’s rights was never mentioned. While a release of energy is certainly physical, the physical condition and health of children was never explicitly linked to the “release of energy” view. Choice-making was brought up while discussing benefits of recess, and problem-solving was mentioned by one of the administrators prior to discussing benefits, but the idea of recess also being cognitively challenging and an extension of classroom learning was never stated.

Another benefit of recess that was never discussed was that it serves as a time for educational professionals to make observations of the students in a natural environment. All of

the aspects of recess the principals mentioned centered on what the students would be doing during and/or gained from recess; none of them commented on how teachers may benefit.

While students with ADHD were brought up, students with special needs were largely neglected. For example, students with Autism greatly benefit from the social experiences during recess. Not only were none these benefits said, but of the benefits that did get discussed it was never stated that recess was the only way students could be able to achieve these benefits and that they cannot be gained elsewhere in a school setting.

Administrators' perceived difficulties with recess.

Principals offered a variety of challenges they face when providing recess. Administrator #1 stated that “indoor recess presents problems” because the students are confined into a smaller space and are already upset themselves that they cannot go outside. Similarly, Administrator #5 mentioned indoor recess being a hassle. Administrator #3 brought up how “social problems arise,” and so did Administrator #5 who stated that social conflicts were also negatives about recess. Administrator #2 stated that “scheduling could be an issue.” For example, if the class periods of the day needed to be shortened for an assembly, it is a difficult choice to keep recess as part of the revamped schedule. Administrator #4 said that they struggle most with having these particular students follow limited directions (i.e. stay in the gym) after they have been given freedom of choice. She also said that while most of the time they perform better in classes after recess, sometimes they come to class “hyped up” if a social conflict rises during that time.

Three common barriers to providing recess were discussed in Chapter 2: time, social conflicts, and physical safety. Of those, two were specifically mentioned by the participants, but they were conveyed in less dire terms than in the literature. Only one of the six administrators stated that finding time to provide recess is a difficulty, and she said it's a struggle when they are

revising the schedule for a special event. Two of the six administrators stated that social conflicts are a problem from providing recess.

As for the final proposed trouble of physical safety during recess, not one of these principals mentioned it. The concern of the physical safety of the students and prevention of injuries that arise during recess was not an issue for any of these administrators. This shows again the importance to gain the perspectives of administrators who make the choice to provide or withhold recess, instead of assuming and placing blame.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. It is not reasonable to assume that the opinions and knowledge shared of these six administrators represent the opinions and knowledge of all administrators. Therefore to make any general conclusions about the perspectives of all administrators from this research is not possible. While the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of administrators' reasoning to provide or withhold recess, the results are meant to be informative, not representative.

Another limitation of this research is the variety of the participants. While there were differences in the demographics of the participants and the schools they administrate, all were essentially similar in the sense that they have all made the choice to provide recess in their schools. While their perspectives are still valued, the views of principals who do not allow recess at their schools are missing. If such were interviewed, there may have been more varying responses and more representation of the administrative population.

It is also important to look at the entire collection of data while reviewing the data in this chapter. For instance, while some administrators may not have included the idea of recess being unstructured time, they may have mentioned it as a benefit of recess. It is significant to recognize

that they had not thought to include that piece of information in their definition; however it is just as significant to recognize that that doesn't mean they don't hold that knowledge.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The decline of recess is an area of concern in the field of education, as well as an area of debate. As the decline of recess has been documented for at least the last decade, it seems to have been given more attention with the last few years. In response to this heightened concern, many studies have been done to analyze the potential and unique benefits of recess.

In some of this literature, researchers place blame on administrators reducing or even cutting time for recess. As they place blame, they make statements that are not backed by research. An example of these statements is that administrators are reducing time spent on recess so as to increase instructional time. Other statements include administrators eliminating recess to do the troubles that may be experienced in providing recess, such as social conflicts among students. These statements have been assumptions.

The question that I examined had to do with the decision to provide recess or to withhold recess. Why do administrators, who have the authority to provide or withhold recess in their schools, make the decisions that they make?

Searching for the potential answers of this question is beneficial to the field of education in multiple ways. One reason is to eliminate or to be able to disregard the finger-pointing and blaming within the literature. Another reason is to give administrators an opportunity to express what they know about recess, and what they face in making the decision to provide or withhold it. Not only that, but if administrators are playing a role in the decline of recess, learning the source of their decision to reduce recess can lead to finding a way to come up with a solution.

Before researching this question in the field, it is critical to gain an understanding of the topic of recess. This was done by a review of the literature. In order to accurately research recess,

defining it was vital. Recess, for the purpose of this thesis as well as much of the literature in the field, is defined as a break in the school day where students have unstructured time.

It was extremely necessary to give administrators an opportunity to express their perspectives on this topic. Interviewing them was the best option, as opposed to a questionnaire or survey. This is so that the participants are able to provide responses that are not limited to the researcher's perspective. Of the six administrators that were interviewed, all of them ensure that recess is provided to their students by having school-wide policies in place. While some policies may be more effective in providing recess, each of the administrators make an effort for recess to be provided. For a few of these administrators, recess was held as a high priority to be offered to all students on a daily basis. As for the other principals, they seem to hold value the practical use of having recess as an incentive for good student behavior. When discussing the benefits of recess, all of the administrators neglected many of the benefits that were found in the literature review. Also, when talking about the struggles of providing recess, the administrators' perspectives did not reflect the proposed troubles of providing recess that were found in the review of the literature. The results of these interviews contribute to the knowledge of this topic.

Future research needs to be conducted on this topic. There are limitations to this thesis, such as only six administrators have had the opportunity to share their knowledge on recess. Similar studies can be conducted in order to gain a wealth of knowledge from the people who are in authority to provide or withhold recess. Once that has been obtained, more will be known on how to combat the obstacles of providing recess.

Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Numerical ID of interviewee: _____

The objective of the interview is to give the participant the opportunity to explain their decisions regarding why they provide or withhold recess to students during the school day. It is important for the interviewer to not lead the subjects' responses. Therefore, wording of questions asked or prompts provided must be taken into careful consideration. Below are examples of questions or prompts that may be used during the interview (note that the emphasis of the interview should follow the lead of the participant, these questions are to be used if needed for prompt):

- How do you define recess?

- How do you feel about this topic?

- Do you have a policy regarding recess at your school? _____
 - Why or why not?

 - If so, what is it?

- What circumstances are needed in order for you to provide recess?

- What benefits do you believe recess provides, if any?

- What struggles come with recess, if any?

- What leads to your ultimate decision of providing recess or withholding it?

- What else would you like to share about the topic of recess?

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