Since When Did Recess Become a Dirty Word? Examining the Impact of NCLB on Daily Recess Time in Pennsylvania Elementary Schools

Michael M. Patte
Bloomsburg University
Introduction

✓ Many school districts across the country are reducing or eliminating time devoted to recess due in part to increasing school and teacher accountability for student performance on state mandated standardized tests and the belief that time is more wisely spent on academics.

✓ More recently, since 1990, 40 percent of the nation’s 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess from the daily elementary school schedule due to increased pressure from numerous sources to improve achievement (American Association for the Child’s Right to Play, 2000).

✓ According to Skrupskelis (2000) the phenomenon of reducing time for recess has no credible research to back it up, and is actually counterproductive to increasing the academic achievement of students.

✓ Further, a series of studies conducted in Canadian schools by Martens (1982) speaks to the importance of recess as a vehicle for improving academic success. The schools in the studies increased the time children spent engaged in physical activity to one-third of the total school day. Though the students spent significantly less time on academic subjects, scholastic achievement levels increased.
The action research project sought to unearth teacher and administrator perceptions about the importance of recess in each of their schools.

Sixty undergraduate early childhood education students conducted the research project in the Pennsylvania school district from which they graduated.

These sixty schools represented rural and urban districts ranging from small to large throughout the Commonwealth.

The students conducted a face-to-face interview with elementary school personnel and obtained answers to questions from a twelve question recess survey created by the researcher.

Students then used the data gleaned from the interviews to write a final report documenting the importance of recess in a particular elementary school in Pennsylvania.

The data from the student final reports is shared in this presentation.
Interview Questions

The interview questions included:

1. Do you believe recess is a necessary part of the school day?
2. Do you believe recess contributes to child development?
3. Does your school devote time for recess each day?
4. How many minutes are devoted to recess each day?
5. How many minutes do you believe should be devoted to recess each day?
6. Has the time devoted to recess in your school decreased/increased recently?
7. To what do you attribute the decrease/increase in time devoted to recess?
8. Was the decision to decrease/increase the time devoted to recess in your school made collectively or unilaterally?
9. Do you believe eliminating/reducing time for recess is a mistake?
10. Do you believe eliminating/reducing time for recess will have implications for children?
11. Do you believe eliminating/reducing time for recess is based upon solid research?
12. Do you believe eliminating/reducing time for recess is politically motivated?
✓ According to Pellegrini and Smith (1993), recess is a period of active, free, usually outside play during the day set aside for elementary and sometimes middle school-age children.

✓ An essential element of recess is student choice. In other words, recess is unstructured and undirected.
Recess & Brain Development

✓ The recent research on brain growth and development stresses the importance of active, physical, and cognitively stimulating play for all children (Zwillich 2001).

✓ Research by Brink (1995) suggests that capacity to master new information and recall past information is enhanced by biological and chemical changes in the brain caused by exercise.

✓ Research asserts that the brain operates on a cycle of 90 to 120 minutes, and over the duration of each cycle, the brain becomes alternately more and less productive in the processing of either verbal or spatial information (Klein and Armitage, 1979).

✓ Rossi and Nimmons (1991) point out that twenty minute mental breaks throughout the day enhanced productivity. The brain performs poorly when attempting constant intense attention, and is capable of ten minutes or less of continuous focus on external stimuli.
Daily recess provides many benefits for children including enhanced: aerobic endurance, muscle strength, motor coordination, attentiveness.

According to Clements and Jarrett (2000) children’s bodies experience heightened physical growth between the ages of 4 and 12, and vigorous physical activity during recess stimulates the development of the heart, lungs, and other vital organs.

Further, the CDC (1997), reports that regular physical activity is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety in adolescence.

In addition, Rivkin (2001) found that most children who play outside on a regular basis are healthier, and physically active children are more likely to become physically active adults (AHA, 1999).
Rogers and Sawyers (1988) found that through outdoor play, children develop social and emotional skills.

Jambor (1994) also recognized the playground at recess time as one of the few places where children can actively confront, interpret, and learn from meaningful social experiences.

When children organize their own games, they exhibit a wide range of social competencies including respect for rules, self-discipline, leadership skills, aggression control, conflict resolution, and an appreciation for the culture and beliefs of others (Jarrett and Maxwell, 2000).

Research by Pellegrini (1992b) suggests that social relationships developed on the playground facilitate relationships and learning inside the classroom as well.
Recess and Classroom Behavior

✓ Research by Bogden & Vega-Matos (2000) suggests that students are more focused on their teachers and school work after recess.

✓ Allowing time for a mental break in the form of recess may minimize disruptive behavior once students return to the classroom. Therefore, recess can be viewed as an important component of classroom management.

✓ A study by Pellegrini & Davis (1993) found that children became fidgety and less attentive in the absence of recess, while children engaged in vigorous playground activity were less fidgety and more attentive after recess.
Methods

✓ The action research project was conducted during the spring 2005 semester by undergraduate early childhood education students enrolled in the Introduction to Early Childhood Education (62.121) class.

✓ A twelve question recess survey created by the researcher was used to generate the data on teacher and administrator perceptions about the importance of recess in each of their schools.

✓ Participants of the action research project included sixty undergraduate early childhood education majors and a combination of sixty teachers and school administrators representing public elementary schools throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

✓ Each participant took part in a face-to-face interview conducted by the researcher throughout the spring 2005 semester. The format of the interviews was semi-structured and included twelve research questions.

✓ Interview notes were coded and analyzed to discern emergent themes.
Results

✓ An overwhelming 98 percent of participants believed recess was a necessary part of the school day.

✓ The vast majority, 98 percent of participants believed recess contributed to the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children.

✓ 97 percent of the Pennsylvania school districts represented in the action research project offered daily recess.

✓ The average time devoted to daily recess among the sixty Pennsylvania school districts represented in the action research project was 20 minutes.

✓ The participants believed an average of 30 minutes should be devoted to daily recess in their schools. This represents an increase of ten minutes to the average time presently offered throughout the sixty Pennsylvania school districts included in the action research project.

✓ 50 percent or 30 of the Pennsylvania school districts represented in the action research project decreased daily recess time recently, while none of the schools increased daily recess time recently according to the participants.
Results

✓ According to participants, the school districts that decreased daily recess time felt pressure to do so due to increased school and teacher accountability for student performance on state-mandated assessments, and due in part to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, a finding echoed by Skrupskelis (2000).

✓ 28 of the 30 or 93 percent of Pennsylvania school districts that reduced daily recess time, made the decision to do so unilaterally, without input from the teachers or parents.

✓ 100 percent of the participants viewed the elimination or reduction of time devoted to daily recess as a mistake to be avoided.

✓ 100 percent of the participants believed that eliminating or reducing time for daily recess would have negative implications for children.

✓ 97 percent or 58 out of 60 participants did not believe eliminating of reducing daily recess time was based upon solid research, but rather due to pressure demanding increased school and teacher accountability for student academic performance.

✓ 92 percent or 55 out of 60 participants believed eliminating or reducing daily recess time was politically motivated. This political pressure was exerted by the federal No Child Left Behind Legislation and its call for greater school and teacher accountability for student academic performance.
Implications

Advocate for Recess as a Vital Part of the School Culture
✓ Undergraduate and graduate coursework in teacher and administrator preparation should highlight the important role of advocacy in affecting educational change at the local, state, and federal policy levels.

Document the Positive Outcomes Associated with Recess
✓ Teachers need to share this knowledge with parents, colleagues, principals, superintendents, school board members, and policy makers to ensure the staying power of recess as part of the school culture/educational landscape and to prevent its elimination based upon current political motivations.
Implications

Initiate Public Discourse Concerning Recess
✓ In 93 percent of the Pennsylvania school districts that reduced daily recess time, the decision to do so was made unilaterally, with no input from community members, parents, or teachers. Any school decision affecting such a large number of children and families should be debated in an open forum with opportunities for all sides to share their positions before a final decision is made. Such a forum would bring the issue out into the light of day, validate the feelings of all of the stakeholders, and apply some political pressure to those making the final decision.

Hold Public Officials Accountable for Policies that Impinge Upon Daily Recess
✓ Teachers can endorse candidates for local, state, and national public office who support recess as a vital part of the school day and advocate for policies to protect this precious commodity, and oppose those candidates who do not.
References


