

VOICES OF THE SCHOLARS AND VOICES OF THE CHILDREN: SCHOOL RECESS IN AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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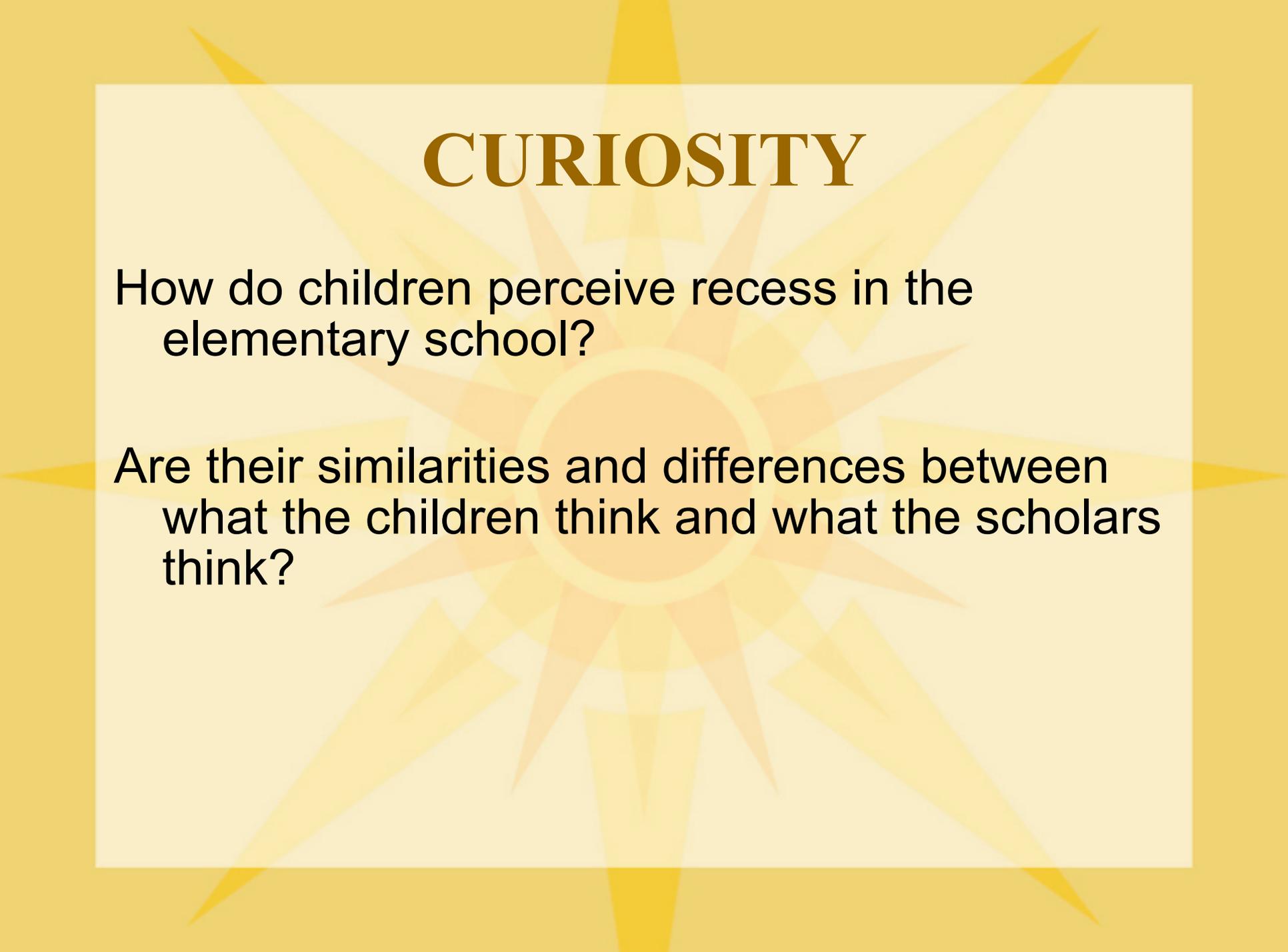
CONTEXT

- In the fall of 2005 nineteen 5th grade students were given a writing assignment in which they were presented with a hypothetical situation: their school principle was considering the elimination of recess for grades for K to 4.
- Students were asked to take a position: for or against and then ask to support their position.
- Essays were initially independent of this project and neither the children nor the teacher were aware of the reality of declining rates of recess in American public education.

CONTEXT

- Of the essays, 17 were written in support of recess and 2 were written in opposition.
- It should be noted that this was a graded assignment and as such, the content of the essays could have been influenced so as to meet the perceived expectations of the teacher.
- The teacher of this 5th grade class was (and continues to be) an active participant in the children's recess activities.

CURIOSITY



How do children perceive recess in the elementary school?

Are there similarities and differences between what the children think and what the scholars think?

RESULTS

- The essays were first reviewed to find emerging patterns and themes.
- Themes were matched for similarity and divided into two over-arching categories: theoretical and applied
- Of the responses in favor of recess, the responses of the children were consistent with the professional literature AND presented a variety of themes that are not currently emphasized within the professional literature.

THEORETICAL THEMES

Within the essays children noted rationales to support recess that parallel the dominant theories within the recess literature:

Surplus Energy Theory
Arousal Theory
Novelty Theory

Of these themes, surplus energy was the most cited reason for the importance of recess.

Examples

The second reason is to burn off energy. If kids have recess, they can burn off energy and be ready to learn after recess. Some kids bore too much energy and need free time to learn some off. Also kids also need energy they could have Recess to get energy back.

EXAMPLES

Finally, to burn off energy I would use recess. For six hours, we are at school and mostly sitting. Especially for kindergarteners it is very hard to sit still for that long. With the angry ants running around in your pants it would be very hard to learn. Even teachers need to be rid of those ants some times.

APPLIED THEMES

Children clearly make the connections that the value of recess lies outside cognitive gain alone. Applied themes within the data demonstrate this.

Children cite recess as a time for them to develop and maintain friendship, exert human agency, and build positive attitudes towards school.

Of the applied themes, the most cited reason in support for recess was its social value.

CONTRADICTIONS

- The implications of the social themes of this data is especially interesting considering that many opponents of school recess note that school recess should be modified and/or eliminated because of the prevalence of bullying and anti-social behavior on the playground (Jarrett, Dickerson and Hoge, 1988).
- An argument that is NOT supported by empirical data (Pellegrini, 1993; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) or the children.

EXAMPLE

Kids need to spend time with friends.
Recess lets kids make new friends. Kids
could play with the kids they couldn't
play with at home.

EXAMPLE

Some people only get to see their friends at recess.

Imagine, no friends! That would

really stink! Wouldn't it! I know I hated it when I just moved here and didn't have any friends. The day goes on forever in your own lonely world.

VALIDITY

- It should be noted that the school district from where these essays came from is an affluent community with a very low rates of serious crime. It is possible that children who attend schools within communities with higher rates of crime and violence may report differently about their playgrounds.
- As such, it is important not to generalize this data to the experiences of all children but rather to recognize it for its potential to give voice to this particular sample.

CONCLUSION

Children recognize that the value of school recess is more than the sum of its parts. Research should be mindful of the voice of the child.

As one child so aptly put:

When children have fun, they are happier and happier children are better learners.