The effects of substituting structured play for unstructured play on the attitude of students and teachers

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THE EFFECTS OF SUBSTITUTING STRUCTURED PLAY FOR UNSTRUCTURED PLAY ON THE ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Recess</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario In Progress</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition Of Unstructured And Structured Play</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured Play</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured Play</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role Of Recess</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Positive Effects Of Recess</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Negative Effects Of Recess</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Differences</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recess Duration</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Issues</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH METHOD</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENTATION OF RESULTS</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns Arising From The Study</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 At Recess I Have Fun With My Friends And This Makes School Fun..23
Figure 2 Recess Is Boring Because There Is Nothing To Do .........................................24
Figure 3 Students Need A Recess Break From Classes..................................................25
Figure 4 Students Need A Time At School Such As Recess That Is Not Structured By Teachers .............................................................................................................. 26
Figure 5 After Recess I Feel I Listen Well & Understand My Subjects Better Than Before The Recess Break ................................................................. 27
Figure 6 After A Recess Break Students Approach Their Tasks More Enthusiastically Than Before The Break................................................................. 28
Figure 7 I Worry About Getting Into Arguments During The Recess Break...... 30
Figure 8 On Supervision I Have Observed Students Displaying Disruptive Behavior Which Affects The Free Play Of Others .............................. 31
Figure 9 Thinking About Recess Makes It Difficult For Me To Concentrate On My Class Work .............................................................................................................. 32
Figure 10 Students In Your Class Who You Know Have Had Their Free Time Disrupted By Other Students On The Playground Appear Less Focuses On Their Studies Than Before The Recess Break.............................. 33
Figure 11 After A Recess Break Class Time Is Used To Resolve Problems Students Encounter At Recess................................................................. 34
Figure 12 Students Need A Recess Break In The Morning And Afternoon........ 35
Figure 13 I Think Students Should Have A Recess Break In The Afternoon....... 36
Figure 14 I Would Be Willing To Stay At School Longer Each Day If We Could Have A Recess Break In The Afternoon ................................................................. 36
Figure 15 For Optimal Learning To Occur Students Need Two Recess Breaks (One In The Morning & One In The Afternoon) & A Noon Hour Break. 37
Figure 16 For Optimal Learning To Occur Students Need One Recess Break In The Morning And A Noon Hour Break................................................................. 38
Figure 17 I Would Prefer To Have An Activity Class Chosen By My Teacher Instead Of A Recess Break In The Afternoon ................................................................. 40
Figure 18 Students Would Prefer The Recess Break Over Any Structured Teacher Activity.............................................................................................................. 42
Figure 19 Substituting A Structured Activity Class Such As P.E. Or Drama For The Recess Break Would Eliminate The Need For The Recess Breaks 43
Figure 20 Substituting A Curriculum Approved Class Such As P.E. Or Drama For Both Morning And Afternoon Breaks Would Foster In Students A More Positive Attitude Towards School .............................................................................................................. 44
Figure 21  Substituting A Curriculum Approved Activity Class Such As P.E. Or Drama For The Afternoon Recess Break Would Foster In Students A More Positive Attitude Towards School .................................. 45

Figure 22  After An Activity Class Like P.E. Or Drama I Am Able To Listen Well & Understand My Subjects Better Than Before The Activity Class .......... 46

Figure 23  After A Structured Activity Class Students Remain More Focused During A Subsequent Non-Activity Class .................................................. 47

Figure 24  If I Could Have My Choice Of An Activity Class Instead Of Recess I Would Prefer Not To Have Recess .......................................................... 48
INTRODUCTION

Defining Recess

In the average school day (5.5 hours) which includes two fifteen-minute recess breaks and one noon hour, elementary school students spend approximately twenty-seven percent of their day involved in unstructured play activity. This percentage of time is comparable to the amount of time students in elementary school are allotted for the subject, mathematics. Because it is an implicit part of a child's regular school day, recess is often taken for granted by adults, parents and teachers, who assume that all children have at least one recess daily (Corbin, 1979).

In recent years, with the many additions to the curriculum and demands made on class time with the introduction of new programs promoted by school boards, many schools have decided to eliminate recess to regain more instructional time (Corbin, 1979; Pellegrini, 1991). Often these decisions are made by administrators attempting to create appropriate time tables in which teachers can schedule the number of classes required by curriculum and school board policies.

Scenario In Progress

The following scenario is presently in progress:

A school in which I have been able to observe was established as a Fine Arts School in the fall of 1990. Incorporating the Fine Arts program into the school's existing program of studies greatly affected timetable schedules as increased time allotments needed to be assigned to the fine arts subjects. To accommodate the time allotments for these classes, without altering the regular school schedule (8:45 a.m. - 3:15 p.m.)
and to allow for early dismissal each Wednesday at 2:00 p.m. for more frequent staff meetings to discuss developments of this relatively new program, the afternoon recess was eliminated.

Structured activity classes that were a regular part of the school program including dance, drama and physical education were to be scheduled in the afternoon so that children were not confined to their desks or the classroom for the time period between 1:00 p.m. - 3:15 p.m. The staff felt that giving children a break from the formal classroom setting would greatly enhance students' attention span in their studies and ultimately improve class performance or achievement. While teachers favored this decision, little discussion focused on how students would react to the new schedule.

The activity classes, however, were only part of the afternoon program. Along with these classes, the afternoon was dedicated to such regular school subjects as Social Studies and Science, both of which involve a great deal of reading, especially for upper elementary students in grades four through six.

While the decision to abolish the afternoon recess was being formally established, I pondered the cliché that a change was as good as a rest. Would students' attitudes towards their studies be affected by this difference in opportunity to engage in structured or unstructured play? Would it matter so long as they were getting an active break from the classroom setting? With increasing consideration being given to moving away from recess as a break for children in Canadian and American school systems, I wanted to learn more about what was happening in some schools that abolished the recess break. How successful were these schools in terms of nurturing a positive attitude among students towards school? Since recess is usually a time for students to socialize, would their ability to socialize change? What techniques have
schools adopted to allow for students to have a break from the classroom setting? Have these techniques proved to be a successful alternative in terms of student self concept and ultimately their attitude towards their studies? Are educators in schools that have abolished recess satisfied that children are receiving the same benefits they normally would if their school had scheduled recess breaks? Given the chance, would these same educators want to revert back to a system that allowed for a scheduled traditional recess break?

**Definition Of Unstructured And Structured Play**

**Unstructured Play**

For the purpose of this study, unstructured play or recess will refer to those times when an adult is not structuring the social interaction, either indoors or outside, between children in a regular school day. Typically a school will have these unstructured play periods scheduled in the morning for approximately fifteen minutes, at noon for approximately forty-five minutes following lunch, and for an additional fifteen minutes in the mid-afternoon. Most frequently an adult, often a teacher, is assigned to supervise, that is, to observe but not interact with the play styles of children. However, he or she may intervene in disciplinary situations where children require extra guidance, in the case of rough play, bullying and intense arguments among students, for example.

**Structured Play**

Structured play generally describes situations in which adults totally regulate the social interaction among students. Again, this can occur in the school building or outside on the playground. In adult supervised games, it is adults, not children, who usually make the rules and settle disputes (Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989). In one of the
schools that is a subject of this investigation this normally occurs in physical education and dance where teachers design the structure of the play and in drama where students are taught dramatic skills through role playing. Structured play also lends itself to other aspects of the curriculum such as language arts and social studies, for example.

**STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Although recess has been a part of the Alberta elementary student’s school day for many years (at least fifty), presently there is very little empirical research on recess and unstructured play (Pellegrini, 1991). Many authors have suggested that children do need a recess break just as adults need a coffee break (see, for example, Corbin, 1979) and that the general effect of recess on children is positive (see, for example, Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney, 1990; Corbin, 1979; Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989) although, for some children, the literature suggests, fights on the playground and other negative experiences that can occur at recess might inhibit self esteem and affect attitude towards school (Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney, 1990; Corbin, 1979; Farley, 1988; Hagedorn, 1984). Some schools have eliminated recess from school schedules for a variety of reasons including the many time demands of the curriculum (Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney, 1990; Corbin, 1979; Pellegrini, 1991). Pellegrini (1991) suggests more research is needed to determine the effect of such actions. One of the sample schools in this study eliminated the afternoon recess break to accommodate more curriculum in the form of structured play. To my knowledge, presently there is no research describing the effects of substituting structured play for unstructured play on students’ attitude toward school.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of substituting afternoon recess (unstructured play) with structured activity classes involving large motor
movements, such as dance, drama and physical education, on the attitudes of grades five and six students.

**The Role Of Recess**

Whether it occurs in the form of a coffee break, a meditative walk around the block or "recess", human beings seem to need to take a break from the immediate tasks at hand, especially if they seem to extend for any length of time (Corbin, 1979; Pellegrini, 1991). Corbin (1979) felt that children needed a break from daily tasks more frequently than adults and lack of gross muscle activity (activity that often is typical of recess) was counter productive to active participation in learning in all areas across the curriculum. Students' self-esteem can be affected adversely when they are constantly experiencing frustration brought on by their being unprepared to engage in their school studies. Despite lack of empirical evidence, Pellegrini (1991) implies that children's attention to academic tasks can be increased and their overall attitude towards class work improved if they are systematically provided with opportunities for diversion.

Whether it be the human body's physical need for exercise or the human mind's mental need for diversion, the literature suggests that the rationale behind the recess break is that human beings require a certain amount of time away or a break from the tasks at hand if they are to continue to attend to the task effectively, and there is the implication that this is essential if the task is of an academic nature.
There are a limited number of published and unpublished sources of information on the subject of recess and the majority of them have become available only within the last ten years. The recess break is becoming a subject of controversy as more education researchers explore the issues involved in unstructured play and threats to its existence. This section of the research project will review the current literature on the topic of recess and the nature of unstructured play.

It is one of the premises of this study that the consequences of abolishing recess in schools can best be determined if the potential positive and negative repercussions on student attitude are researched and analyzed. I use the term "potential" due to the lack of empirical evidence of findings on the nature of recess and its contributions to learning.

**Potential Positive Effects Of Recess**

The literature suggests that recess provides benefits to two essential components of the education system - the learner and the educator.

Children, and most adults for that matter, enjoy the pleasures of recreation and like to have "fun". When asked about their favorite subject at school, many elementary students will respond that it is "recess!" For the majority of boys and girls in elementary school recess is fun and the opportunity to play together is an important reason for them to come to school. In a study by Blatchford, Creeser and Mooney (1990), children were
asked what they liked best about playtime in school. The general response was that it was a time in which they could relax, have fun and take a break from class work.

Educators are under the constant challenge to make learning enjoyable. If we are to entice children to the halls of education, educators must first devise a system that is of interest to students. It appears at least that one element of inducement already exists in schools today. That element is recess. Corbin (1979) comments that enjoying recess can be a valuable school experience for students, an experience that can make school, in general, more enjoyable. Blatchford (cited in Farley, 1988) further implies that for some children playtime is the most enjoyable part of the school day and its importance should not be underestimated.

Exactly what makes recess "fun" can be better understood by examining elements of recess more closely. Recess is a time for everyone, including teachers, to get away from academic tasks. It can be a time for students and teachers to enjoy each other's company in that informal context. Because of its lack of structure, children can find within recess their spot on the continuum from rough and tumble play to sedentary play. It is possible that, here, gender may be an emerging issue. The literature seems to suggest that rough and tumble play is favored more by boys while girls prefer sedentary play, but most children appear to derive an equal amount of enjoyment from recess and its elimination could affect students' attitude towards school. Elementary schools that alternate studying with frequent periods of play and physical activity help children maintain attention, make learning easier and more enjoyable, and create cooperative and positive student attitudes toward academics.

Jambour (1994) suggests that while play, social interaction and extracurricular activity may not contribute directly to academic success, they make [the rest of] school
more interesting and pleasant. Pellegrini (1991) would argue that the links between recess and academic achievement can be more directly explained. He contends that after prolonged on-task activity, children need a diversion and desire novel or new environments if they are to return to their studies with a refreshed positive attitude. The recess break on the playground provides the learner with a “novel environment” but after the recess break, the children, having become bored with the recess environment look forward to the now novel environment of the classroom. He refers to this phenomenon as the novelty theory. Upon their return to the classroom from recess, student subjects in different studies appeared more relaxed and content. Fidgeting and squirming (often associated with prolonged confinement of children in elementary classrooms) in their desks was minimized, further facilitating their concentration and their engagement with the learning process (Jambour, 1994; Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989). Stevenson (1982) comments that attention is more likely to falter after several hours of classes than it is if opportunities for play and relaxation precede each class. Teachers, in a study done in Norwegian schools, felt that recess reduced mental fatigue and negative interplay in the classroom and, as a result, students focused on their studies more intensely (Jambour, 1984).

Recess does not only promote an attitude which facilitates the learning process. Some of the literature argues that elements in the recess break are educational in themselves. Pellegrini and Glickman (1989) propose that because education is developmental, younger children are qualitatively, as opposed to quantitatively, different from older children in the way in which they learn. A child in kindergarten, for example, probably learns to read better by first telling and evaluating stories than by memorizing the alphabet. Young children practice their linguistic skills on the playground at recess
and these later become part of the traditional curriculum (Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989). In the classroom setting, a child might learn to say, "I like this story because it reminded me of my summer house." On the playground, at recess, it might become, "It's your turn to play 'it' because you haven't done it yet." Potentially, creativity can flourish more readily on the playground. Because recess is an alternative to teacher controlled activities, children have the opportunity to devise and initiate their own activities, set up their own rules and find means to deal with difficulties (Blatchford (cited in Farley, 1988); Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989).

Because the goal of educators is to prepare students for responsible citizenship, learning basic skills (the three R's) and social competence are equally important. Recess provides children with the opportunity to enhance social cooperative skills (Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989). In fact, for some children, it may be their only means of interacting with other children in an unstructured setting because school playgrounds, especially in bigger cities, are one of the few places where children can play safely (Opie and Opie, 1969). Peer relationships on the school playground are an essential element in the development of adult social skills. Children gain first-hand experience in knowing how far to go and in taking on different roles (Sluchin, 1981). Pellegrini and Glickman (1989) support this premise using the example of chase games such as tag. Not only must there be cooperation among students if the game is to exist at all, but social problems are solved throughout the play in the negotiation of roles and compromise (for example, taking turns being "it") in language that is meaningful to all participants. This situation appears to apply more strongly to boys whose "vigorous outdoor" play, it appears, is more closely related to their social development than girls. Girls, Pellegrini (1991) feels, are more responsive to other social interaction contexts. Pellegrini and
Glickman (1989) believe that children demonstrate different levels of competence in recess activities than they do in adult-structured settings where they may not display the same degree of competence because adults are monitoring the social interaction. When adults make the rules and settle the disputes (Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989) children have less opportunity to negotiate with each other.

Yet one other need for recess may be that valuable information concerning children's social development can be obtained by educators from observing children's play. Play, a proven indicator of school adjustment (Pellegrini and Glickman, 1989), can give educators insight into children who may be at risk. For example, in one study conducted in Georgia, achievement on standardized tests was considerably lower for children observed on the playground to be socially passive and adult-oriented compared to those who engaged actively in socially interactive games. According to Jambour (1994), children who consistently spend their recess sitting alone or with playground supervisors and not participating with peers may be at risk for personality disorders and may need help. A powerful indicator of social order and cultural information, Gudegeon (1988) argues, can be identified and quantified through observation of children's behavior on the playground.

What about teacher attitude towards recess? The literature is very limited in this area. Aside from being a much needed break for teachers from their routine tasks, recess can give teachers insight into student attitude and behavior. Jambour (1994) comments that teachers observing children on the playground during recess can assess, among other things, peer popularity, one proven predictor of school adjustment. Because of potentially vital student information obtained at recess, teachers cannot
underestimate its many benefits. An analysis of teachers' attitudes towards recess is one component of this study.

**Potential Negative Effects Of Recess**

A common misconception among adults - educators and parents - is that recess is an enjoyable experience for all children. Although most children would agree that they enjoy taking a break from their school tasks and the structured environment of the classroom, the literature suggests that the typical feature of recess, that is going outdoors to play, can mar some children's experiences at school and have negative repercussions on their social development (Farley, 1988).

Many children find recess to be a difficult experience (Corbin, 1979). It is assumed that all children know how to play simply because they are children. According to Corbin, this is a fallacy for at least three reasons. Many children lack game playing skills, experience and self confidence. Other children are subjected to conforming to rules they may feel are unfair or, out of spite, are shut out of games entirely. Without continual reinforcement, typically an educator's role in a structured learning environment, many children may never enter into the game-playing scenario that is often an enjoyable element of playground behavior. How many teachers have dealt with student problems at recess and heard comments such as "There's nothing to do"?

While educators attempt to instill positive behaviors and attitudes in their students, recess, according to some research, appears to be facilitating a counter productive effect and many of the best efforts of teachers may be undermined with the name calling, bullying and fighting that occur at that time (Farley, 1988). Unacceptable behaviors most frequently happen on the playground, not within the school building.
Farley (1988) argues that if trouble is brewing among students, it will most frequently erupt at recess. Schools may be allowing opportunities for confrontation on the playground that do not normally exist in the classroom situation. The negative effects of these situations can echo throughout the child's school day. Educators, as well, experience these negative effects. Often class time is spent sorting out problems on the playground, especially, states Blatchford (cited in Farley, 1988), during the long noon hour recess.

It is evident that in an atmosphere of name calling, bullying and fighting, some children live in fear, frustration and turmoil during the recess period. In a survey of approximately 30,000 primary students in England (Hagedorn, 1984), the results revealed that many students were scared to play in certain areas of the playground at their schools. At Brackenshop School in Middlesborough, England, many students reported that often weaker students were beaten up by stronger students and personal possessions were stolen from those who could not defend themselves. In interviews with 174 students, Blatchford, Creeser and Mooney (1990) confirm this report. Twenty one percent of respondents reported disruptive behavior such as being bullied or beaten up as a normal part of their recess break. Children not belonging to a clique, according to Corbin (1979), are often victims of interrogation by groups of other children. Others are victims of continuous cycles of younger children being picked on by older children (Hagedorn, 1984).

Farley (1988) reports that girls tend to be bothered more by the teasing and name calling than boys, while boys tend to participate in fights more than girls and social deviants are not the only source of disruption and unacceptable behavior. Frustrations that arise from normal unstructured game playing can sometimes lead to severe
aggressive behavior (Blatchford et al. 1990). Many scholars support the premise that the quality of children's play is generally declining. In schools where the nature of discipline problems at recess is so intense, eliminating recess might well be a sensible alternative.

Do all schools find more discipline problems during recess than any other period of a child's school day? In schools where disruptive behavior during recess is obvious, the answer is definitely in the affirmative. Other schools, however, should not feel smug in their assurance that the recess period appears to pose no problems. The literature suggests that teachers have a limited idea of what happens on the playground because they are so occupied with the moment-to-moment concerns of supervision (Blatchford et al. 1990). In addition, aggressors often will not demonstrate negative behavior as frequently or at all in front of teachers. Frequently, students are the only ones who know the real story behind disruptive events transpiring on the playground and adults just do not realize how bad some situations may be. Teachers, according to Hagedorn (1984) do not realize the frequency and extent to which negative actions, especially bullying, are manifested during recess.

While some students are victims of aggressive behavior carried out by their peers, others are victims of the nature of the playground and the great variety of events that can transpire there. Lack of playground space is frustrating for those who enjoy playing games such as soccer, football and baseball that require a lot of room. Lack of playground equipment induces boredom in students to the extent that the statement, "There's nothing to do" is not uncommon. As well, accidents can ignite feelings of anger and bitterness (Hagedorn, 1984).
Because children have no choice in the decision to have recess or not, but are given the choice to do whatever they please (within school rules and regulations) during that time, many find it difficult to take charge of the situation and direct their behaviors constructively. In densely populated schools, the congestion and noise is so disturbing that students complain of being "bashed around" and "knocked down" almost every time somebody runs (Hagedorn, 1984).

Another element that raised a concern for children was weather conditions (Blatchford et al. 1990). Either the temperature was too hot or too cold, with more emphasis on the latter, for twenty-six percent of the 174 students surveyed in this particular study. Recess in cold weather, students complained, seems to last for hours rather than minutes.

It would seem a logical conclusion to provide children with recess, simultaneously giving them the opportunity to choose whether they wished to remain inside or go outdoors. The consequence of this solution is concern about the disruption that could result if children were allowed inside and how they then might be adequately supervised (Blatchford et al. 1990). Blatchford (1989), in an earlier study, (cited in Blatchford et al. 1990), argues that these problems can be solved if teachers are willing to increase their supervision allotments so that indoor and outdoor play are adequately supervised. However, in smaller staffed schools, supervision duties are already onerous. Further increasing teachers' supervision duties may put extra strains on their already heavy work load.

Teachers, too, need a break (Jambour, 1984) and are more refreshed and eager to perform their duties after time away from the students. One might question when teachers would get their break time in schools where recess was limited or eliminated...
entirely, or divided into choices of indoor or outdoor play. In one specific situation, the solution that contributed information to the study that is the subject of this paper was to hire a part time teacher to relieve the regular teachers so that they could in turn receive a combined break and preparation time.

**Gender Differences**

The area of gender differences in children's reaction to recess is apparent yet inconclusive due to the lack of empirical research on this topic. Eaton and Enns (1986) noted a significant gender difference in motor activity among preschoolers with boys being more active than girls. These differences became more pronounced as students progressed into elementary school. This premise is supported by Kraft (1989) in his study concerning behavior of children during unstructured playtime in which white girls were found to be the least physically involved in moderated to vigorous activity. Pellegrini (1990) speculates that outdoor recess may be more necessary for boys than girls. As noted earlier, Farley (1988) stated that boys were more inclined than girls to participate in such aggressive play as fighting and negative confrontations. The consequences of these actions probably echo throughout the day for many children, affecting their class attention, among other things. One might assume the negative effects of aggressive play on student attitude would be reduced and students' (especially boys') time on task following recess would be enhanced if the play environment were more structured.

Girls interviewed about recess (Blatchford et al. 1990), were reported to dislike the playtime period, especially the long noon hour, because they often did not know what to do. Many were bothered by cold weather, teasing and name calling and were more inclined to stay indoors at playtime than boys. Eliminating the recess break, one
might assume, may not have any serious repercussions in this situation. In fact, one might speculate that with the stress of having to go outside eliminated, girls would be even more focused on their studies, further enhancing their academic achievement and ultimately promoting more positive attitudes towards school in general.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Recess Duration

There appears to be no empirical research on the effects of entirely abolishing recess for children in elementary school. For the purposes of this study, I focused on what happened following the elimination of only the afternoon recess break, consisting of a fifteen-minute time period scheduled halfway between study periods.

Research Issues

Due to the lack of research in this area of study, this project may stand as a preliminary introduction to the effects of abolishing recess in the schools. The research activity that developed the findings of this study can be classified as action research. Much of the data for the study was drawn from a particular school situation. Through the application of teacher and student surveys, as well as participant observation, this study attempted to explore the effects of decisions made about unstructured break time. While the sample chosen is selective and small, it was hoped that study findings would give some insight into the effects of substituting recess with structured play on teacher and student attitudes. Within this selective sample, it was further anticipated that different groups would emerge from which comparisons could be made regarding different attitudes towards substituting unstructured play with structured play. For
example, based on the literature, it was anticipated that the attitudes of girls and boys would be qualitatively different.

Because this was a preliminary study, no generalizations to other situations could be made regarding the findings. I had hoped that further experimental studies might be given serious consideration if the findings of this study raised any concerns. As one example I had thought that comparisons in attitude among students randomly selected in schools with structured playtime and unstructured playtime might then be made if this first sample showed strong support for or disapproval of structured play or unstructured play during the afternoon recess break. More specifically, the literature suggests that recess has varying effects on girls and boys, indicating that substituting structured play for the more traditional activities of recess may lend itself to different results for each of the sexes. I had further hoped that this study would produce results that would encourage further explorations of gender differences in comparisons of other groups of children available for study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sample

Two different elementary schools in the same school district, School A and School B, were selected for this preliminary study.

School A was chosen as a subject for this study initially because it was convenient. I am presently employed at School A. A second reason for including School A was that students are bussed to this school from different parts of the city, thus providing variety in the sample of students. School B was chosen because the high numbers of students enrolled in Grade 5 and 6 would allow for larger sample size.
Both schools are located in middle class neighborhoods. Students bussed to School A come from middle class neighborhoods, as well. Both schools have the same recess schedules - one recess break in the morning, one noon break after lunch for approximately thirty minutes and no afternoon recess. I reasoned that if I could keep at least these variables constant, the survey results would more clearly depict how middle class students have reacted towards recess generally and the loss of afternoon recess in particular.

**Subjects**

**Students**

All children enrolled in fifth and sixth grades at School A and School B schools during the 1995-1996 school year were subjects of this study. A total of 102 students provided usable data by responding to twelve survey questions.

**Teachers**

The teachers selected for this preliminary study included all teachers at School A and School B during the 1995-1996 school year. A total of 17 teachers provided usable data by responding to twelve survey questions.

**Data**

Data for this study was obtained in the form of a survey consisting of two questionnaires, a teacher questionnaire and a student questionnaire. The questionnaires consisted of 12 questions each and were designed to survey teachers’ and students’ opinions on the effects of substituting structured play for unstructured play on the attitudes of students and teachers.
To administer the student questionnaire, I explained to students in both schools the purpose of the survey and the procedure for completing the questionnaire. Students were then given class time to respond to the 12 questions. Once students completed their responses to the questions, I collected the questionnaires. All questionnaires were to be completed in the time allotted. Out of 104 students surveyed, 104 questionnaires were returned completed resulting in a 100% rate of return.

To administer the teacher questionnaire, I followed two separate procedures for each school. In School A, I passed out the teacher questionnaire at a staff meeting, explained the purpose of the survey and the procedure for completing the questionnaire. Information concerning the purpose of and procedure for completing the questionnaire was also stated on the questionnaire sheet. I asked that the forms be returned to me within two weeks.

In School B, I did not administer the questionnaire personally to the teachers. The teacher questionnaires were given to the principal of School B to be distributed to the rest of the staff. The purpose of the survey and the procedure for completing the questionnaire were clearly outlined on the questionnaire sheet. Out of 22 teachers surveyed, 17 completed questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 77% rate of return.

The findings of this study are almost certainly influenced by other information gleaned from my own regular contacts with students, parents, administrators and other teachers in both schools.
PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Before examining the effects of substituting unstructured play with structured activity classes on students' attitudes, I decided first to examine students' attitudes generally toward unstructured play.

The literature suggests that recess is the most enjoyable part of a school day for a majority of children. Figures 1 and 2 indicate that students are in complete agreement with this statement. Figure 1 indicates students' responses to the questions asking whether or not students had fun with friends during recess and whether or not this made school fun. Out of 102 students, 90 students responded affirmatively, with 61 students strongly agreeing. Only 4 students expressed any kind of aversion to recess, further emphasizing the degree to which recess represents a time of joy for almost all of these elementary students.

Figure 1

Is recess boring because there is nothing to do? Figure 2 provides overwhelming evidence that these students did not think so.
With 97 students expressing their disagreement to this statement, it is very obvious that the students in this sample do not have difficulty with an unstructured time period. To further explore their feelings towards recess, I asked all students why they liked the recess period. With the exception of one who commented with "No comment", all students indicated directly or indirectly the fact that they enjoyed the freedom to pursue their own interests. The following comments were typical of their responses:

- "It (recess) is fun. I can do things I want, not the things teachers tell me to do. I can play with my friends."

- "I can run around and do basically what I want."

- "We have enough equipment to make it fun."

With this group of students, the recess period appears to be used appropriately and is clearly not viewed as a waste of valuable time. In Figures 1 and 2, no clear gender distinctions emerged. The obvious love for recess expressed by the Grade 5 boys was not much more emphatic than the responses of Grade 6 females, who scored the second highest in the two categories reported in Figures 1 and 2.
Figure 3 indicates that students believe that they do need some kind of break from classes. In fact, 45 of the 102 students who responded to the statement, "I think the purpose of recess is to...", actually used the word "break" in their written response. In addition to these responses, many other students implied that a break was necessary, often commenting that "It (recess) takes your mind off school work."

The general good feeling surrounding the idea of a "coffee break" or "tea time" seems to be not just restricted to adults. In fact, there appears to be evidence that this group of elementary students are in need of more breaks than adults. For example, some students felt that recess was a time to stretch "and get out of their desks." Adults, who work primarily at a desk are at liberty to "get up" and stretch at will while, in the classroom, some students may not feel that they have this same privilege.

It is interesting to note that a larger number of Grade 6 students, especially males, strongly agreed that a recess break from classes is needed than did their Grade 5 counterparts. The trend in Canadian schools is to eliminate recess as students advance in their school years. For example, these same grade 6 students who agreed...
so strongly that students need a break from classes will receive no scheduled fifteen minute "recess" break in junior high next year, either in the morning or in the afternoon.

Figure 3 indicates that all the teachers participating in this survey are in full agreement with the idea that students need a time at school such as recess that is not structured by teachers.

Figure 4

![Bar chart showing teachers' opinions on students needing a time at school such as recess that is not structured by teachers.](chart)

Although the adult coffee break allows colleagues to socialize (much like recess for children) and is in itself an enjoyable time, its main purpose is to allow workers to revitalize themselves so they can approach their work refreshed. This "novelty" theory (Pellegrini, 1991) discussed earlier, is supported in this study, but not overwhelmingly. Figure 5 indicates that 66 students agreed that after recess they felt that they listened well and understood their subjects better than before the recess break, while 8 students disagreed. Many students were able to articulate very clearly their understanding of the purpose of recess. Typical of their comments were:
• "take a break from working so you can work better after recess"

• "have fun, burn off energy and to help you think better after"

• "let us use up our energy so later we can get to work"

**Figure 5**

It is the "No Opinion" response to this statement by 27 students that offers the possibility that the nature of recess is so connected with play time that some students do not associate recess with academic performance.

The data presented in Figure 6 indicate that teachers generally agree that students do approach their tasks more enthusiastically after a recess break than before the break.
However, even a few teachers expressed "No Opinion" to this statement. None of the teachers surveyed took a strong stance on this issue. From my own observations, I would have to agree that for the majority of students, recess does serve the purpose of a break. However, there are some students who have a genuine difficulty with lack of structure in their environment. Some students find it difficult to socialize with their peers and bullying or isolation of students does occur in the playgrounds I observed. Rather than renewing these students' interests in academic tasks, recess may well serve as a distraction from class work, which, if not monitored closely, can affect the rest of the class. This might help explain the varied responses to this statement.

Is recess educational in itself? Although the surveys did not address that question in terms of academic education, they did elicit quite specific responses relative to the building of socialization skills. For example, several students, discussing reasons why they liked recess, offered comments such as:
-29-

• "It is a time to socialize with my friends."

• "I get to play with my friends (who) I usually don't get to play with after school."

• "I get to talk with my friends. I'm such a busy person so I can't be with my friends after school."

These statements are indicative of students' understanding of the need to socialize, and their awareness that the recess period at school may provide one of their few opportunities to do so. Students who are bussed to school may only be allowed to see their friends from another part of the city at school. Other students have agendas that are so busy and filled with after school activities that no time is left for them to socialize freely with their peers. The social cooperative skills that Pellegrini and Glickman (1991) referred to earlier are less likely to develop if children experience fewer times where they can play in the spirit of free cooperation, take on different roles, and learn how to compromise. There may well be some students all of whose social interactions might be monitored continually by adults.

In some cases, the literature suggests that there are students who experience difficulty with the concept of free play during the recess break. The numbers of students in this study whose responses support this premise were low. When asked to complete the sentence beginning, "I dislike recess because...", 75 students replied with only supportive comments about recess such as, "I like everything about recess" or "You start having so much fun and the recess bell rings. I don't think it's long enough sometimes." Of the 27 students who did offer a negative opinion towards recess, 8 commented that weather was a factor, expressing a strong dislike for cold days when they were still requested to go outside. 6 students felt recess was boring due to a lack
of things to do, with three stating that this was more true on cold days in the winter. Thirteen students were concerned about the physical injuries that can result at recess due to aggressive behavior such as fights or rough play, and mental anguish caused by teasing or by "little kids running all over the place and bugging you." It is important to keep in mind that this statement, "I dislike recess because..." was set up intentionally to guide students to select any negative features concerning recess, yet 74% of respondents did not attend to this negative influence and, rather, added their positive comments.

Figure 7 further illustrates the large number of students, especially Grade 6 females, who indicated they do not worry about arguments during the recess break.

**Figure 7**

![Bar chart](chart.png)

The higher incidence (slight as it is) of worry among Grade 6 males concerning recess arguments may be in keeping with the literature findings that more aggressive types of play and behavior are more prevalent among male students. One student commented...
on his dislike of the environment which he felt had too much structure stating, "We are not allowed to tackle."

To what extent are teachers aware of the negative aspects of recess? When asked if they observed students at recess displaying disruptive behavior which affects the free play of others, the majority of teachers indicated that they did, as illustrated in Figure 8. Once again, this may be further confirmation of one of the literature themes that although recess is fun for many, it is not the best of times for everyone.

Figure 8

The number of students in this study who concerned themselves with negative aspects of recess is very low and it is apparent in the great majority of responses that the positive features of recess certainly outweigh the negative. But recess was originally scheduled in the school day as a break time after which students could return to their studies in a renewed and refreshed manner, analogous in some ways to the adult coffee break. Does recess "refresh"? Or could it be interfering with students' studies? The students in this study certainly agree that recess is great and "kids love it", but do they offer any understanding of ways in which it might be fulfilling an academic purpose?
After all, as many researchers and others have noted, it does take up a great deal of time in a child's day.

Figure 1, discussed earlier, illustrates the large number of students who supported the premise that students do indeed need a break in between tasks. Figure 9 indicates that recess does not appear to interfere negatively with students' learning.

**Figure 9**

Over half (56) of the students disagreed that recess distracted their attention from class studies. They seem to be suggesting that students benefit from the recess break similarly to the way adults benefit from a coffee break.

It is interesting to note that of the 21 students who felt recess reduced their ability to concentrate on class work, 12 of these were females from Grades 5 and 6. From my own observations of upper elementary children on the playground, I have frequently observed boys being more involved in sports and more accepting of team game playing (yes, sometimes aggressive), whereas girls tend to play more in groups or "cliques" which can often lead to teasing and, occasionally, the isolation of some students. Students who worry about not having someone to play with may be found to have some
inability to concentrate on class studies and, in my own observations, I have seen this to be true at times. However, I am sure there are many other factors at work, beyond these to do with recess behavior, that influence in-class attention and engagement.

Although the majority of students did not feel recess distracted their attention towards their class studies, the majority of teachers surveyed agreed (both generally and strongly) that students they knew had their free time disrupted by other students on the playground appeared less focused on their studies than before the recess break.

**Figure 10**

![Bar chart showing the number of teachers' opinions on the impact of recess on students' focus.](chart)

Most of the teachers who expressed "No Opinion" on this topic were employed part time, as Music teachers, for example. Perhaps they felt they did not know student routines well enough to make any comparisons of students' behavior before and after recess to establish an opinion.

Figure 11 shows that along with their recognition of the inability of some students to concentrate on their studies, the majority of teachers agreed that class time after
recess is often used to resolve problems that students encounter during recess. It is a serious problem to have valuable class time wasted, especially when so many curriculum demands must be fulfilled, and it is a concern for some teachers that problems created during recess can so frequently intrude into the rest of the school day.

Figure 11

This concern might be addressed if the "recess" environment were more "structured" and if more teacher involvement were incorporated into recess time. However, since there is great value for most children in an unstructured environment, it may be possible that further class discussion of socializing and problem solving skills in a period following recess is valuable as well and could affect both students' academic progress and attitude.

Based on the evidence developed through this study, recess, according to most students, is fulfilling quite successfully the requirements of an appropriate and productive break. An equally interesting section of this investigation explores the questions of how much recess time children think they need and whether or not this time
could be substituted with alternative structured activities without negatively affecting student achievement and, ultimately, student attitude towards school.

All the students surveyed had a fifteen minute morning recess break and a forty-five minute noon break (approximately). Figure 12 indicates that most students (73%) feel both morning and afternoon recess breaks are a necessity.

**Figure 12**

![Chart showing student opinions on recess breaks](image)

This point is further supported in Figure 13. However, when asked if they would be willing to stay at school longer each day to make up the extra time used for the recess break, 56 (54%) of the students disagreed (see Figure 14). The conclusion of a majority of students was that a recess break in the afternoon would be nice, but it is not worth having to spend extra time at school.
If students are not willing to stay at school longer in order to acquire a recess break, then perhaps this type of break is not really necessary to enhance students' academic achievement and, ultimately, self-esteem (attitude). Perhaps a change in class activity may be just as good as a full recess break. In such a scenario, the students are simply changing classes. The classes, however, are what might be considered "less academic" activity classes such as P.E. or Drama. As a result,
students have a curriculum-approved "recess" break from the academics but no class time is lost.

In Figure 15 it can be seen that most teachers agreed with students that two recess breaks plus a noon hour break were not essential for optimal learning.

**Figure 15**

![Bar chart showing the number of teachers' opinions on the necessity of recess breaks.]

For optimal learning to occur students need 2 recess breaks (one in the morning & one in the afternoon) & a noon hour break

Figure 16 shows that the existing system involving a recess break in the longer morning class period, a noon hour break and no afternoon recess appealed to an overwhelming majority of teachers.
The teachers in this study believed very strongly that an unstructured recess break was very important, but also felt that "too much of a good thing" could be detrimental. From their comments, it is very apparent that teachers feel learning experiences do indeed occur on the unstructured playground. Many teachers saw the value in a recess break that provided children with opportunities to be with their friends and/or siblings from other classes, without adults constantly structuring the environment. As well, teachers commented that students benefit from the free time by acquiring leadership and cooperative skills and enhancing their own imaginations. They felt that children should be given the opportunity to make choices involving peer relationships and witness the positive or negative consequences of their actions.

Still other teachers felt students needed an unstructured play time to help them unwind, "let off steam", in ways that would enable them to later sit and focus their
attention on their school work. Of course, recess break was seen by teachers as a practical time for students to get a drink and use the bathroom.

On the issue of a recess break in the afternoon, most teachers felt this was not necessary. Many commented that recess was only needed to break up the long work period in the morning. Typical school day afternoons are shorter, and do not require a scheduled break. Many teachers who had previously worked in schools with two recess breaks found that when the afternoon recess was eliminated discipline problems were reduced. Teachers commented that the break earlier in the day when students are not tired seems to be beneficial to learning, but later in the day when students are more tired a break seems to make them want to continue the break and it is often harder to encourage them to focus and concentrate on school work again. Too much unstructured time, according to teachers, could also result in more conflicts between students which, if carried over into the classroom, would lead to loss of valuable productive class time which in turn might affect students' academic achievement.

It is important to note that most teachers felt they needed their "coffee break", too. However, the frequency of breaks teachers needed was not considered an important issue in that when the number of recess breaks was discussed, it was always put in the context of the students' needs. Perhaps the question of breaks for teachers and the impact on effective teaching would be worthwhile for another research project.

Figure 17 indicates that the students in this study had very different views on whether or not a teacher-chosen activity class should replace an afternoon recess break. Alternatively, it is possible that respondents experienced some confusion in answering this question based on a lack of previous experience with the concept of having a recess break in the afternoon.
Thirty-eight percent of the students surveyed preferred the activity class, 37% preferred a regular recess break while 25% had no opinion. The most obvious discrepancy in responses is among Grade 6 males, with 13 in favor of recess and 7 preferring a teacher-structured activity class. My own observations led me to attribute this difference of opinion to the preference of a majority of Grade 6 boys for team sports. Most often when they are given the opportunity to choose between team sports and an activity that might not be a sport, most Grade 6 boys choose the former.

Grade 6 girls' opinions were evenly divided with 11 in favor of recess and 11 preferring a teacher-structured activity class. These results conflict with those in Figure 13 in which 79% of the girls surveyed were in favor of the recess break in the afternoon and only 18% opposed to this break. In addition, both Grade 5 males and females favored a teacher-selected activity class (41%) over a recess break (31%). However, Figure 13 indicates that 79% of the Grade 5 students surveyed believe that students need a recess break in the afternoon.
How can this paradox in students' survey results be explained? In one of the schools in this study a popular teacher-structured, less academic afternoon class is Drama. In my observations students seem to enjoy this option so much that missing an alternative recess break is not an issue.

It might also be concluded that if students are asked if a recess break is needed, they may assume that the alternative is no break at all. However, if the break is opposed to a less academic teacher-structured activity (a change from the perceived norm) students may be willing to substitute their recess time for something equally enticing to them.

Teachers, when asked if they felt students would prefer the recess break over any structured teacher activity, overwhelmingly agreed. Figure 18 shows that 16 of the 17 respondents thought students would elect a recess break instead of any structured teaching activity.

It is interesting to compare the student responses in Figure 17 with the teacher responses in Figure 18. Although teachers believed almost unanimously that students preferred a recess break over any structured teacher activity, 38 students felt they would prefer to have the structured activity while 39 indicated a preference for recess. The remaining students expressed "No Opinion". Perhaps teachers are too hasty in anticipating students' preferences, thinking that if something is related to the school curriculum children will not prefer it over something much less teacher-structured. Maybe we do not know our students as well as we think we do. It may be time that we as educators realize we are doing our jobs well in providing an enticing, enjoyable working environment and that in itself is a reason for students to enjoy coming to school. In informal conversations with parents towards the middle part of August, I have often
heard comments describing their child’s eagerness to start school in September because they are so bored at home.

**Figure 18**

![Chart showing preferences for recess vs structured activities](chart.png)

Figure 19 shows the persistence of teachers' perceptions about students' love of recess. When asked if the substitution of structured activity classes such as P.E. or Drama for the recess break would eliminate students' need for a scheduled recess break, a majority of teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed.
It is very apparent that many teachers believe children need a time in their school day that is not structured by adults.

When speculating if substituting the structured activity class for both morning and afternoon recess breaks would foster in students a more positive attitude towards school, the majority of teachers disagreed.
Despite the similar statements that both graphs (Figures 19 and 20) make regarding teachers' opinions of children's love for recess, there is one slight but interesting difference. Although some teachers felt that scheduling a structured activity might be just as rewarding as a recess break, not one teacher believed that such a change would foster in students a more positive attitude towards school.

In their responses in Figure 18 teachers were asked, in effect, to share their personal understanding of student preferences for recess. In Figure 19, teachers were responding to a general question about eliminating the need for all recess breaks, and they were clearly collectively opposed to that possibility, although two teachers at least appeared to think the idea had some merit. In Figure 20, almost all teachers shared their belief that a decision to exchange recess for classes such as P.E. and Drama would certainly not foster more positive student attitudes towards school. Finally, in Figure 21, teachers show some pronounced differences of opinion over the substitution of certain classes for the afternoon recess break only and its impact on student attitudes.
towards school. While a majority of teachers still disagree, 4 respondents offered "No Opinion" and 6 more teachers actually agreed that eliminating the afternoon recess might actually foster more positive attitudes.

**Figure 21**

Substituting a curriculum approved activity class such as P.E. or drama for the afternoon recess break would foster in students a more positive attitude towards school.

There seems to be no great concern that the long morning work period has a scheduled unstructured recess break in the middle. As well, the teachers in this survey generally accept the idea that, after lunch, children do not need another unstructured recess break. In the schools I have observed in this study, the once-existing afternoon recess period has been abolished and the students' afternoon at school is now entirely structured by a teacher. Despite their overwhelming love for recess, it does appear that many students, when given the choice of a teacher-selected activity class instead of recess, do freely choose a structured activity class. The information contained in Figure 17 indicates that the 104 students in this study are almost equally divided in their preferences for a recess break or an activity class.
Does participation in a teacher-structured activity produce the same benefits of the "novel theory" that the regular recess break provides? Figure 22 suggests that students do indeed return to their studies more refreshed and with renewed energy after structured activity classes. The majority of students agreed with the statement, "After an activity class like P.E. or Drama I am able to listen well and understand my subjects better than before the activity class", while 9 were in disagreement. However, 40 students offered a "No Opinion" response to this statement and I am unable to explain why this would be so.

Figure 22

Figure 23 shows that although 8 of the 17 teachers surveyed expressed "No Opinion" as to whether students, after a structured activity class, remained more focused during a subsequent non-activity class, another 8 teachers felt students were able to concentrate more closely on their class studies, while only one teacher strongly disagreed with this statement.
Figure 23

After a structured activity class students remain more focussed during a subsequent non-activity class

N=17

The information displayed in Figure 24 shows the responses of students when they were able to choose whether the subject for the structured activity class would be either P.E. or Drama. In preparing to answer this question students were told of particular conditions that would apply, namely, that the teacher would structure the environment and enforce rules which might or might not be jointly formulated by teachers and students. Figure 24 offers evidence that more students would prefer to have such a structured environment, with 48 of the respondents in agreement compared to 36 in disagreement with this statement.
A large majority (18) of Grade 5 males agreed (either strongly or generally) that they would prefer a student-chosen, teacher-structured activity while only 7 Grade 5 males preferred a recess break. By a much narrower margin, Grade 6 males slightly favored the student chosen activity (11) to the teacher chosen activity (9), but they also represented the highest number of students expressing "No Opinion". Girls, in general, seemed divided on this question, with 19 in agreement with not having recess and 20 in disagreement. Is it possible that these students do not mind teacher involvement in their play as long as they have input into the type of activity they are participating in? Is this one area of the study where teachers' perceptions of student attitudes (see, for example, Figure 20) are clearly at odds with students' perceptions? While sorting through the information, I pondered whether or not the double negative was confusing to students (having them disagree with the idea of not having recess). However, I believe the verbal explanation given to the students during the administration of the survey did facilitate an understanding of the statement to which the students were responding.
Although students and teachers would both agree that students still might consider recess to be their favorite part of the school day, some evidence gathered in this study appears to suggest that many students are at least open to the possibility of alternatives to recess, under certain circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of substituting afternoon recess (unstructured play) with structured activity classes, especially those involving large motor movements, for example, Drama and P.E. on the attitude of Grades 5 and 6 students.

The majority of students agreed that recess has not lost its popularity and it is viewed primarily as a fun time when children can play freely. Also, recess provides a break from classroom work, so that students can return to their studies with renewed interest after the recess break. Because recess appears to make school enjoyable for students and contributes directly to the achievement of schools' academic purposes, it would be unwise to eliminate all recess breaks from the children's school day.

However, when the afternoon recess break was subjected to the close scrutiny of this study some interesting information was generated. Students, despite their genuine love for recess, were not willing to stay at school longer in order to have the break (even if, for some, it was their only time to play with certain friends). In addition, both teachers and students agreed that sometimes valuable class time was used to resolve problems that developed during recess, and such problems seemed more numerous in the afternoon. Moreover, some students felt that thinking about recess did not allow them to focus as well as they could on their class work.
Evidence gathered through this study suggests that substituting an afternoon recess break with a teacher-structured activity class might be one way to make optimal use of class time, avoid wasted periods, and still provide students with a well deserved break from their studies, all the time fostering positive attitudes in students.

From my own personal observations, this procedure seems to work well. The evidence in Figures 17 and 22 further supports this type of scheduling. Students in this study were not in total disagreement with having their afternoon recess eliminated and replaced by a teacher-structured activity class, regardless of whether or not it might be the teacher's or students' choice of the type of activity. Student responses seem to suggest that if schools are careful in the way they abolish the afternoon recess period and replace it with a structured activity class they may be able to enhance student achievement and ultimately foster more positive attitudes towards school among a majority of students.

**Concerns Arising From The Study**

Two central concerns remain as I try to draw conclusions from the results of this study. First, are we giving students enough unstructured time during the school day? Many of the lessons students learn at school do not come from a book. Teachers commented on the importance of decision making and leadership skills that evolve from children's involvement in unstructured play. Are we denying our students the acquisition of these essential life skills by favoring a more structured approach to learning that appears to enhance student attitude and, ultimately, academic learning?

The second concern relates to the amount of structured time that students appear to desire. Evidence appears to suggest that students equally enjoy teacher
(adult) structured activities and recess (unstructured play) time (see Figure 17). Are today's children becoming too dependent on adults structuring their environment? How many times have we heard parents mention the importance of involving their children in a variety of activities? Have parents perhaps gone too far? Some children's days are filled with so many adult-structured activities such as morning piano lessons, school, after school soccer, swimming, gymnastics, hockey and so on that when nothing is scheduled they appear to think "there is nothing to do". Of course, this is an extreme example of how children's lives can be so removed from free play time. An alternative example, depicting children with no tools or adult guidance to challenge their skills and encourage growth, would be equally ominous. Perhaps young children need more adult structured activities than unstructured time to facilitate and guide skill development and encourage them to use the skills acquired, such as cooperation and decision making, in their unstructured play time. I believe moderation in both areas is the key to children's optimal growth in learning.
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