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Recess: The Forgotten Classroom

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Two camps control the destiny of our children in the K-12 school environment. Both camps believe we are falling behind in reading, math and science. One camp believes that children need more time in the seat to learn important concepts. We don't have time to explore or problem solve or create. We have to excel and beat other countries in academics. The other camp believes play is at the core of learning. Academics without play produces a broken child: one who is disconnected from themselves and others. An unstructured, outside recess environment affords children opportunities to explore on their own terms, and those terms are not limited to the physical world.

At the expense of play, the U.S. has placed significant pressure on students and teachers alike with a pursuit of standardized learning. Most public elementary school principals have been subjected to minimize recess to none or one daily¹ in order to capture the maximum number of minutes required by the school district in language arts, math, science and social studies daily. Interestingly, schools have seen an increase in bullying and other social and emotional issues throughout the day in the classroom, hallways and recess areas which inhibit learning. We continue to believe that the cognitive health of our children

is much more important than the physical and social/emotional wellbeing of our children.

The Let's Inspire Innovation 'N Kids Project (LiiNK SM) was created three years ago to create balance between academics and the social/emotional health of our children and teachers. LiiNK *directly targets students and prepares teachers and administrators to redesign learning environments* by combining three system strategies—recess, character education and teacher training—to combat critical issues affecting development of non-cognitive skills in students. The project focuses on improving non-cognitive factors such as academic behaviors, social and emotional skills, and empathy which in turn will: 1) produce a more equitable school environment for all students, including high need students; 2) develop students who can problem solve, create, think critically, and behave responsibly; and 3) maximize the teacher's ability to engage the learner. Initial research on the pilot phase of LiiNK indicates significant improvement in student achievement, attentional focus, and creation of an environment that is productive for each child to learn.

Recess Defined

For many, the definition of recess can be as abstract as play itself. Some feel that recess should be unstructured, but that physical

activity needs to be at the root of the time scheduled. Others feel as though recess should be more structured, with specific instructions oriented towards physical activity as children are not being active on their own. Most discouraging are those who feel that recess should be structured because children no longer know how to play. The LiiNK Project personnel believe, as other play specialists in the U.S., that recess should be unstructured outdoor breaks where the experience is whatever the child wants it to be. It could be role play, physical activity, sitting and reading, socializing, imagining or just reflecting. This is the most important time when children can “regroup” and refocus their energies.

The LiiNK Project

The LiiNK Project launched as a pilot program in two Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) area private schools two years ago with the addition of two control schools this past academic year. The project was designed to observe unstructured, outdoor recesses daily for its impact on the social, creative, and cognitive development of children. This year, LiiNK launched in four public schools in two school districts and matched four control schools with these four intervention schools. Each entry year for a school begins with K and first grade children, with an additional grade level added each

year until all students through grade 8 are involved in multiple recesses daily, and character development curriculum weekly. In a typical seven hour school day, the students engage in a recess (unstructured and outdoors) every 50-75 minutes before lunch and every 50-75 minutes after lunch.

Recess is such a vital piece to the productivity of our children. As a result of observing and comparing children with multiple recesses daily rather than only one or none daily, we have outlined the following results for implementing the type of recess we have defined and why multiple recesses are necessary. A word of caution: in order to implement multiple recesses daily, training is necessary. LiiNK provides three full day trainings in order to change the school environment to include multiple recesses daily and character development curriculum weekly and change the way administrators and teachers think about the general operations of the school day.

Physical Strategies

One of the questions or concerns that has been emphasized about recess by school personnel in the U.S. is that children do not know how to play nor do they want to. It seems the general consensus is if recess is going to be offered, then someone needs to teach them how to play, and what to play. We disagree vehemently. In order to make sure that a safe environment was maintained, but that teachers were supervising similarly on the playground, certain ground rules were given to the teachers. The teachers were instructed to let the children move at their own pace and to only intervene if the children were approaching an unsafe situation. They were also instructed to allow the children to climb, jump, roll, and chase without teacher involvement.

We have found in the two years of observing children in multiple recesses daily, that it only took one day for the children to notice that someone was not telling them what to do, and that they could play the way they felt most comfortable. As a result of multiple recesses, we found that the children loved to run, chase, roll, jump, climb and swing. They also loved to make up games and play differently during the different recess times. We also saw the children sit for one to two minutes at any given time in the 15 minutes and then hop right up and begin to run again when their bodies are ready. They don't stay quiet for very long. We also found that the children did not need much in the way of movable equipment. They loved hills more than stationary equipment and they could use different spaces for very different things than what adults might do. Overall, recess creates a very lively place for children to move and play in an unstructured environment.

Social/Emotional Wellbeing

Kids inherently want to learn, but the country's reliance on standardized testing has created a classroom in which anxiety is constant. The pressure to perform overshadows the desire to learn. Children are no longer looking forward to school. The most powerful sound we have experienced through the LiiNK Project is that of a child's laughter. Watching the children on the playground, it is evident they are truly happy. Yes, there are instances of injury and bruises, but overall, they truly enjoy being on the playground. In the matching control schools we noticed that children were struggling to make new friends. They were limited to a 15-20 minute period in which they often felt rushed and unsure what to do. With the additional 45 minutes of recess time spread throughout the

day in the LiiNK schools, children became more social and interacted with different groups depending on the recess time. They didn't need equipment to facilitate these interactions, just time.

In general, administrators may feel more recess time would create an increase in bullying behaviors. While an unstructured environment can lend itself to more bullying opportunities, we found that the children actually experienced less instances of bullying. It must be noted that the implementation of a character development curriculum is part of the LiiNK Project for that very reason. Instead of running to the teacher for solace, the children were able to handle their own disputes more responsibly throughout the school year.

Creative/Imaginative Development

Recess affords children the ability to expand their imaginations. A child's greatest strength may be their creativity, yet schools across the country have implemented daily schedules that remove opportunity to develop that creativity. In contrast to the classroom, the playground is a completely unencumbered environment in which children can act on responsible impulse. Imaginative play is not just pleasurable for the children, but aids in classroom problem solving. While adults may view a playground as small and enclosed, the child sees a limitless world waiting to be explored. In our own observations we have seen games evolve from mundane to magical. What once was an unused hill is now a terrain for hula hoop tag, secret labs, and farm houses (structures that I have been unable to visually locate, yet listen to kids describe daily). They did not see the equipment as we do, but instead as a completely novel instrument in which to



Sample Schedule of Recesses and Positive Action

- School Starts 7:45
- Positive Action 7:50-8:05 (15 minutes)
- Content 8:05-8:50 (45 minutes)
- Recess 1 8:50-9:05
- Content 9:05-9:35 (30 minutes)
- Music or Art 9:35-10:05 (30 minutes)
- Recess 2 10:05-10:20
- Content 10:20-10:50 (30 minutes)
- Lunch 10:50-11:20 (30 minutes)
- Physical Education 11:20-12:05 (45 minutes)
- Content 12:05- 12:35 (30 minutes)
- Recess 3 12:35-12:50
- Content 12:35-1:15 (40 minutes)
- Content 1:15-1:40 (25 minutes)
- Recess 4 1:40-1:55
- Content 1:55-2:40 (45 minutes)
- School Out 2:45

The positive action curriculum is taught through the ELAR curriculum time—so no extra time is needed.

Four recesses daily (two before lunch, two after lunch)

Research shows students are not paying attention or able to focus past 45 minutes to an hour—this schedule allows children to reset their brains, focus and actually take in more information. Overall, this schedule promotes a healthier, more focused child than students in traditional settings.

interact. Lava explorers and bat caves seem ridiculous in our adult “practical” approach, but we must acknowledge the role they played in our own cognitive development.

“Kids inherently want to learn, but the country’s reliance on standardized testing has created a classroom in which anxiety is constant.”

When asked what trait was most valuable in employees, many fortune 500 companies responded with “creativity, versatility and imagination.” Clearly creative ability is valued by adults, yet we continue to strip away the one opportunity in which imagination runs rampant.

Cognitive Development

Children’s brains need active, unstructured, outdoor time throughout the day to allow for increased oxygen and glucose to fuel the brain and continued

building of highways where the retention of knowledge exists. We have seen recess withheld from children who misbehave as well as from students who might be labeled

as remedial in order to catch them up with their peers. All the while, the children who can control their off-task behaviors are reinforced by not only getting that one recess

daily, but they are the ones who can do the required work most efficiently. Through LiiNK, we have made sure that the students are not punished through removing recess at any of the scheduled times and that the recess time cannot be used for remedial teaching times. All teachers and children must go outside for the unstructured play four times daily. As a result of these multiple daily recesses, we have seen more attentional focus, an increase in listening skills and an increase in the desire to stay on task to completion across all students. Academic achievement in the children increased significantly from the previous year. The children are not losing time on content in order to increase the amount of recess they receive. The children are actually able to retain more content in a shorter period of time dispelling the argument for increasing the school day for learning to take place.

Parent Support

As we have increased play opportunities for children in schools, we have been pleasantly surprised in the parent support received. The parents have experienced first-hand the positive impact the additional recesses have had on their children.

In the private LiiNK schools, parents pay a premium for their child to learn. At first, administrators felt there would be a backlash from the parents because parents would interpret play as a substitution for learning. Instead, the parents realized learning was enhanced through play experiences and their children came home much happier and less anxious. Administrators and teachers are now hearing from new recruits that the LiiNK Project is what has drawn them to the schools. The same is happening at the public schools in its first year as well.

Conclusions

- Recess is necessary throughout the school day for the social, cognitive, and physical development of children.
- All children need recess.
- Recess has a significant impact on boys because of their need to move and explore.
- Children are much happier and stable with multiple recesses.
- Children’s bodies are designed to move. We are creating emotional turmoil in children through sedentary designed schools.
- Parents want recess for their children.

Additional Reading

Walker, T. (2015, October 1). “The Joyful, Illiterate Kindergartners of Finland.” *The Atlantic*. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/the-joyful-illiterate-kindergartners-of-finland/408325/>.

Strauss, V. (2015, August 21). “Why young kids need less class time—and more play time—at school.” *The Washington Post*. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/08/21/why-young-kids-need-less-class-time-and-more-play-time-at-school/>.



Author

Dr. Debbie Rhea is a Full Professor at Texas Christian

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