

Give kids a break: the social and educational significance of school breaktimes/recess

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This presentation:

- Background – current UK context
- Findings from research on school breaktimes in England/UK
- Implications of breaktimes for social and educational development
- Will argue that breaktimes and informal play are overlooked but have a valuable role in social and educational development.

Will draw on several research projects

- UK national surveys of recess in schools (1995, 2006 and 2017) - Nuffield Foundation funded
- Project on playground activities and peer relations in London and USA schools - USA Spencer Foundation funded
- School mealtimes in primary and secondary schools – SFT funded
- Study on improving the effectiveness of pupil group work in schools (SPRinG) - UK ESRC TLRP funded

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Background

- **Children's social life out of school in the UK**
 - Fewer opportunities for play and socialising
 - More adult structured and controlled time (safety, parenting, sedentary activity, independence/ freedom)
 - Peer interactions - seen as context for anti-social behaviour
- **School priorities in UK**
 - School improvement/ accountability (rankings, int. rankings)
 - More adult led activities (e.g. during breaks; after school clubs)
- **Connections with mental and physical health and wellbeing?**

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Peer interaction at recess in the UK

Generally a negative view (maybe improving?):

- Teachers' concerned with disruptive behaviour, calming down pupils after recess a problem (Blatchford, 1989)
- Much concern with bullying in schools
- Teachers and Government ministers suggest cuts to recess to reduce conflict (Galton et al., 2004)
- Lunchtime biggest management problem in schools (Elton Committee, 1992)
- Increase of structured breaktimes...?
- Need for physical exercise, homework clubs ...

Peer interaction at recess in the UK: Do we need school recess?

- Recently opened Secondary Academy school in Peterborough, England (2007).
- Norman Foster design. No playground and no morning recess
- School for the future - treat children like adults and unstructured play activities thing of the past

"We are not intending to have any playtime. Pupils won't need to let off steam, because they will not be bored" Headteacher

"We have taken away an uncontrollable space to prevent bullying and truancy." Project Manager

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The 1995, 2006 and 2017 Nuffield recess (and lunchtime) surveys



Aims were to:

- provide current, systematic and nationally representative information on a little understood and neglected part of the school day in the UK, and information on changes over the 10-20 year period
- collect current information on main features of recess, including timing, duration, supervision and facilities provided and views on its value, problems arising and behaviour
- obtain information on pupil and teacher perspectives on recess and pupil social life in and out of school

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School Recess: Large scale postal surveys



	1995	2006	2017
Sample approached	10% random England	18% random England and Wales	20% random England
Responses	1557 (61%)	1566 (38%)	Approx 1050 (20%)
Sample received of all schools	6%	7% primary 6% secondary	Approx 5% primary 5% secondary

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Pupil Recess Questionnaire Survey 2006



- Total sample 1344 students: 536 primary (10 years), 808 secondary (431 at 13 years, 377 at 15 years)
- From 9 secondary and 11 primary schools. Did not vary significantly from other schools.
- Questions about:
 - Views on school and recess
 - Friends in and out of school and social life outside school
 - Clubs in and out of school
 - Travel to and from school
 - Pocket money and work outside school

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Total recess time



Average total time for recess (in mins) over the school day in 1995 and 2006 changes.

	Primary school (5-11 yrs)		Secondary school (12-16 yrs)
	KS1	KS2	
1995	94	83	76
2006	91	77	69
Change per day	-3	-6	-7
Change per week	-15	-30	-35

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Pupils' views on lunchtime, when not eating



	Great	Like	Not sure	Don't like	Hate it
Year 5	69%	21%	6%	2%	2%
Year 8	47%	41%	8%	3%	1%
Year 10	44%	38%	13%	4%	2%
Total	55%	32%	9%	3%	2%

- Pupil views about lunchtime overwhelmingly positive
- Very few say they dislike lunchtime. Similar for morning recess
- Most think lunch break is not long enough or about right; very few think it is too long

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Pupil views on what they liked about recess



	Primary	Secondary	Total
- Time to be with friends	93%	81%	86%
- Free time	66%	48%	55%
- Time to relax	-	50%	30%
- Eat and drink	14%	41%	30%
- Engage in games/ attend clubs	64%	5%	29%
- Physical exercise	42%	19%	29%
- Get fresh air	-	37%	22%

- Vast majority, particularly girls, identified the opportunity it allowed them to be with friends
- Followed by providing free time for them to do what they want.
- Primary pupils enjoy games and physical activities
- Secondary pupils like free time, time to relax and to eat and drink

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Social life outside of school

- 'How often do you meet with friends outside of school?'

	Every night	A few times a week	Once a week	Less than once a week
Year 5	18%	45%	11%	26%
Year 8	15%	46%	10%	29%
Year 10	20%	48%	4%	27%
Overall	18%	46%	9%	27%

See Baines & Blatchford (2011)

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Recess in the UK: conclusions

- Reduction of lunchtime and afternoon recess - because of pressures of the curriculum and worries about pupil behaviour
- School management toward recess imposed more constraints on pupils' activities and movement
- But: pupils say that the best thing about school is the chance to meet their friends and other children
- Recess is experienced universally in UK but is a relatively unique context for children to interact regularly and socialise with a wide range of peers.
- Recess and lunchtimes may be one of the few remaining contexts for: play, recreation, physical exercise, relatively safe pupil-pupil interaction not dominated by adults, constrained within homes or schools, or mediated through electronic means.

Value of recess

Many areas and ways that we can think how recess interactions and activities can have implications for children's development. Here focus on two:

1. Peer relations and social development
2. Role in school learning

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Research and theory on peer interactions?

Research tends to focus on the troubled child (e.g. aggressive, rejected, bullied, victimised or withdrawn child)

But a more positive role for peer relations comes from theories on cognitive and social development, e.g.:

- Piaget, Sullivan, Youniss
- Developmental psychology (Hartup, Ladd, Rubin, Dunn, Howe etc) – peer relations as 'developmental necessity/advantage'
- Harris (1995) 'group socialisation theory' – peer groups a central context for development and social-cultural transmission

Value of recess

I am not idealistic about playgrounds; I know they can be rough. But ... you hope...that this taste of a wider world will be a safe opportunity to learn how to get on with others...

You want them to explore the world of chosen friendships – not just (in their own class) - and understand how human relationships form and break, how to handle betrayal, conflict and envy, to show generosity and ignore slights... you hope that in this brief freedom, your child will learn how to be an individual in society, not just a unit in an allocated team or class....Without playtime, these things will not happen during the long school day, and may be lost entirely to children who don't live close. School will be a workplace, only without the statutory breaks....

Libby Purvis. 'How did we learn to be so defeatist?' May 8th 2007, The Times.

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Some important social qualities developed (informally and implicitly) in contact with peers during recess

- Negotiating entry to games/groups
- Making and losing friends
- Managing conflicts
- Manage loyalty, betrayal and slights
- Perspective taking
- Trust
- Mixing with different groups
- Handling bids for leadership
- Forming groups for activities
- Having fun
- Small talk/ Self disclosure
- Social sensitivity
- Coping with teasing, taunting, peer pressure

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The social value of peer interactions and recess: **Context for socialisation**



Children learn important social skills during interactions with peers at recess, relevant to child and adult life (e.g., Sluckin, 1981). Not taught in school

Hartup (1992): peer group as 'cooperative socialization contexts', supporting cooperation, reciprocity, effective conflict management, intimacy

"The peer group provides arguably the most efficient and highly motivating context for the learning and development of social skills which will ultimately enable children to live effectively as a member of adult society." (p171 – Maxwell, 1990)

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Recess a context for friendship formation



- Much research shows that children with friends more socially skilled and better adjusted
- Recess a main setting within which friendships are formed and developed
- Play provides opportunities for friendship formation and development (see Baines & Blatchford, 2011):
 - the game as a social scaffold to develop friendships
 - the game as consolidator of friendship groups
 - the game as social exploration
 - the game as super-ordinate goal

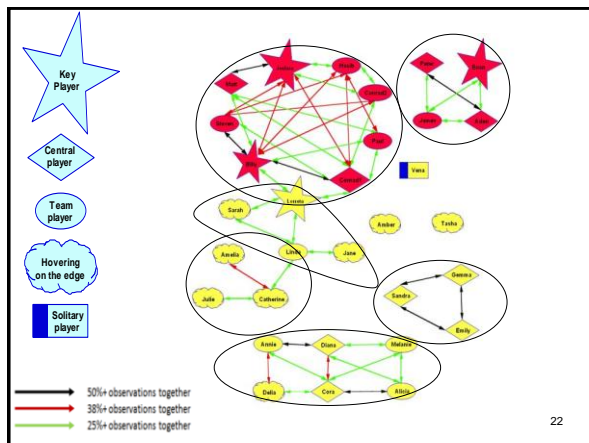
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Breaktime games and peer relations: Spencer project – UK



- 1 yr longitudinal study - 4 classes in 4 schools (approx 129 pupils). Data collected at start and end of school year (pupils aged 7-8 years)
- Data collected:
 - Systematic observations of pupils on playground - 4 weeks
 - Pupil and teacher q'aires and researcher ratings
 - Multiple measures of social interaction, peer relations and behaviour

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School mealtimes as an 'open' setting and preparation for recess



Extension of playful interactions with peers mostly in terms of verbal play, interactions with friends and socialising.

C1: It's time to have fun and talk to your friends and relax....

R: Would you like to be able to go out earlier?

C1: Sometimes I would. Sometimes I don't mind 'cause I like staying there with my friends and I like talking a bit without my lunchbox. (1d - PL)

R: Can you remember what you were talking about?

B: I said, 'What can we play this playtime?' D says, 'I don't know.' I join in and say, 'Why don't we play something adventurous like 'It' or 'Run Away'?

A: I think I remember then saying, 'No. Let's not play 'It.' I think that's the sort of things that we talk about. (1a - SD)

Baines & MacIntyre (forthcoming)

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How playground social life connects with...

Classroom engagement and learning

We don't know enough about this

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Peer relations in classrooms



- “Many school policies are based on the suppression of peer relations in the classroom.” (Epstein, 1989)
- “To children in school, the most important people in the classroom are the other children.” (Harris, 1998)

Recess, peer relations and classroom engagement



- A set of studies linking the opportunity for recess / improved school lunchtimes and improved classroom engagement and behaviour (Golley, Baines et al., 2010; Storey et al., 2011; Jarrett et al., 1998; Pellegrini et al., 1995)
- **Improvements due to ...?** (a break/change, play, social interaction, physical exercise, eating, eating environment)

Recess, peer relations and classroom engagement



- The interactions and relationships developed during recess can **prepare children for working together in the classroom**
- dynamics of class affected by informal peer relations
- Every teacher knows that classes vary good deal in how well they work together
- Differences important because they can mean difference between class easy to teach and academically productive and class that is not

Recess, peer relations and classroom learning



- **Friends perform better on challenging school tasks** (Zajac & Hartup, 1997)
- Because know each other, more commitment, resolve disagreements
- Higher quality ‘transactive’ talk (Miell & MacDonald, 2000)

Recess, peer relations and classroom learning: Collaborative group work



- But not just between friends...
- Much research shows that collaborative group work has positive effects on performance in science, maths, English, logical thinking (Baines, Blatchford et al., Howe; Johnson & Johnson, Slavin)
- The value of ‘collaborative discussion’ (Baines et al., 2009)

Why does peer interaction in Collaborative Group Work (CGW) work well?



- Because pupil-pupil interactions encourage mutuality, perspective taking, problem solving, conflict management, ‘connectedness’ (Damon & Phelps, 1989), even rights and responsibilities
- Skills and dispositions which work well in CGW are **the same as those that underpin informal peer relations in informal play at recess**
- ...and these skills/dispositions are central to working well together – of importance in wider world of adult work and life.

Conclusions: adult led solutions to 'problem' of peer relations?



- In the UK many *adult led solutions*, e.g., adult structured and supervised clubs, social skills training etc
- But is the solution to impose external adult led solutions and to cut back on contexts within which peers interact (like recess)?
- Pupils have to develop and internalize moral view, built up from what they learn from normal, everyday interactions, often informal interactions with peers

Conclusions: what can be done?



- Need more recognition of, and more trust in, peer relations and recess as a site of central importance
- Balance between pupil independence and school control needs to be reconsidered
- Schools seen as setting moral context rather than dictating rules and solutions (Blatchford, 1998)
- Schools are vital settings for cultivation of students able to work well together and trust each other
- Recognise that recess provides much of what is expected of schools (in terms of the development of social skills)

Conclusions



- So move away from 'suppression' or neglect of peer relations as formed and expressed during recess...
- ...to consider opportunities for peer interactions **deliberately and positively** in relation to social development and learning
- of enormous significance in terms of childhood and schooling, but also in service of what we hope for citizens of the future.