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Feature Article

Recess: Academic Time-Waster, NOT!

Recess may become a casualty of "teach to the test" initiatives in some schools, and a casualty of budget-cramped four-day school weeks in other districts. But, recess is an integral part of learning, and not a time-wasting drain on the school day.

Fun, letting off steam, changing the pace of the day, building and tearing down ad hoc relationships, implementing game rules, winning triumphantly and losing gracefully, or less so…these are only a subset of the lifelong lessons learned and practiced at recess.

And modern children need recess more than ever.

Gone are the days of students' after school "pick-up" games in the school playground, teaming up in friendly rivalry in vacant lots, or wild-and-woolly tournaments on a not-so-busy neighborhood street.

Free normal childhood interaction with lots of other childhood personalities is crucial for development of emotional and interpersonal intelligences. In addition, foundation and the values associated with teamwork, problem-solving, shared decision-making and project management are formed during childhood playtime.

But modern lifestyle and societal burdens prevent children from acquiring these skills outside of school, so recess is a critical need. A few of these influences include:

Unsupervised, Broadband Internet Access

Play Dates

Latchkey (Self-Imposed) Child Care

Bedroom Media Centers (Cable Television with Premium Channels, Stereo, Multiple Game Consoles

After-School Programs

Homework

Accelerated Block Programs

Behavior Management Programs that Seek to Keep Children Quiet, On-Task and Focused Upon Test-Taking Skills

Fear of Being Outside the Home and Unsupervised, Including:

Parents Driving Children to the Homes of Friends and Playmates

Sex Offender Registries

School Bussing or Parents Delivering and Picking Children Up at School

Centralized Schools with Extensive Physical Plants and Huge Student Populations (Instead of Neighborhood Schools within Walking Distance)

Looming Four-Day School Weeks will provide Less Opportunity for Children to Interact Teaching in an Era of Fear The No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) and its effort to "root out" non-highly qualified teachers created a mentality of 1.) standards-based instruction, 2.) a loathing of any off-task, off-test school-day activities and 3.) higher-order thinking drill time focused upon improving high-stakes test scores.

In addition, line up and wait your turn Physical Education Classes (begrudgingly scheduled to meet state requirements and to provide teachers with a planning/ conference period) fail to provide the unstructured, outdoor play time that children require.

And paring down recess to a one after-lunch time slot, where students have to choose between eating a pleasant meal in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere (at their leisure) or getting outside to play for the remainder of the half-hour lunch period Sidebar Forgive the sarcasm. A quiet, peaceful, unhurried luncheon where ideas can percolate and digest is the environment that builds healthy bodies and minds.

Most school lunch periods are the embodiment of the factory shop floor, foundry or automated trough-filling feedlots.

The noise is horrendous. Is it a wonder that children dump the contents of their meal trays and seek escape outside, away from the clamor and din? But, even when teachers extend the after lunch recess period by ten minutes, a twenty-minute play period, once a day, fails to satisfy students' need for physical activity and play.

Un-Stress through Change-of-Pace Activities Stress researchers advise change-of-pace activities to decrease stress levels. This means that if students and teachers spend extensive periods focusing upon mental activities, the physical (preferable fun-filled) activity erases the effects of stress.

And, physical activity is more effective in decreasing stress than other, sedentary activities such as watching television during a break. Even eating fails to diminish stress levels…as large cohorts of obese children demonstrate.

Stopping academic activities for anything that is not content-based instruction, and believing that these in-seat "breaks" perform the role of recess is an indicator of unenlightened teaching, or the mark of following misguided administrative directives. Learning through Change-of-Pace Activities The "adult learning cycle" is 90 to 120 minutes long. This is the time that focused attention and concentration can take place. Of course, this focusing time varies by age and individual characteristics.

For children, the length of focus time is shorter.

Fortunately, longer study times can be sectioned into shorter periods. Just getting up, changing seats, indulging in a "rest room break" (if the pace of high-stakes test coaching allows) serve to rekindle attention. Sidebar Almost every teacher agrees that students that need to take advantage of the rest room facilities are unable to concentrate on much else. And that concentration diminishes in inverse proportion to the internal pressures that signal a need to leave the classroom.

Some teachers clutch to an aversion for allowing students to enjoy unsupervised time, even restroom time. Emphasis on this level of control is detrimental to learning.

Of course, there is a solid foundation for concern. Younger students might "play" in the bathroom, stop up sinks with paper towels, float sticks and debris and sail an imaginary navy. They might sing, talk to students of other classes, and otherwise amuse themselves at the cost of the teachers having to repeat a set of instructions.

Older students might smoke, take drugs, "tag" the stalls, or use the time to send text messages to their friends.

However, students that need to be away from the classroom that badly could be steered toward more productive outlets.

And we don't mean listening to the teacher drone about textbook content. In fact, saying words and acting out the behavior, the Total Physical Response (TPR) can erase some of the recess deficit that our students

experience. Sidebar For a description of how to employ the TPR Method, see the Classroom Toolkit articles, Total Physical Response: Building "Verbal-Physical" Connections that take Hands-On Learning to a New Level and Total Physical Response - Story: Integrating Storytelling into Instruction Even semi-aerobic activities such as singing, dancing or yoga can strengthen memory and learning. Sidebar The secret to yoga as a semi-aerobic activity is to breathe slowly, and imaging the breath flowing into the stretched body parts. The time for change of pace varies by the weather.

Bright, sunshine-filled days allow longer periods of concentration and allow for daydreaming.

Dreary, stormy days (with low barometric pressure) require more frequent diversions from study. And, during periods of high ("rubbing hackles and fur" the wrong way") wind, intense focus on academic tasks should be avoided altogether.

During certain weather conditions, students (and their teacher) become grouchy and irritable. (No we are not talking about gloomy high-stakes test days.)

Wise teachers break ranks with their lesson plans, shelf the schedule; and substitute games, art, entertaining videos, etc. Be sure to plan for these days and keep resources available for an instant launch.

For games on these days, choose games where everyone wins. Avoid pitting "Team Grouch" against "Team Wedgies-at-Every-Desk." Games with winners and losers add aggravation to the already irritated, and salvaging instructional goals would be better served with silent, free reading.

Of course, the longer the concentration period, the longer the change-of-pace activity needs to be.

So, a period of intense study either will be followed by recess (that the enlightened teacher schedules), or will be followed by a period of fidgeting, daydreaming and inattention (that the test-stressed teacher doesn't want). These off-task, off-focus reactions to intense and extended periods of study are normal responses that are set off by students' biological clocks and body rhythms.

The teacher who schedules the recess, break or change-of-pace improves instruction at accelerated rates as compared to the "taskmaster, rub their noses into the grindstone if they don't pay attention" teacher.

But, there are other ways of taking change-of-pace breaks besides exiting to the playground. Directed Daydreaming:

Recess in a Box (Box-like Classroom, that is) Daydreaming serves a vital and beneficial biological process. These benefits include a constellation of components that include: Relaxation

Stress Reduction

Memory Processing

Idea Incubation

Mental Processing using the Students' Most-favored Learning Style (Preferred Intelligence) Processing

But, teachers can harness this momentum-changing power with "directed daydreams."

Directed daydreams are narrated guided fantasies that ask students to imagine scenes, scenarios and other mental movies.

These teacher guided excursions can include all five senses; i.e., vision, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling.

And during these narrations, teachers can work in suggestions for increased memory, ease of recall, integration of ideas and positive self talk.

Scenario content has unlimited possibilities, and is best conducted in an "ad hoc" manner instead of being read or taped in advance. With so many variables to choose from, these guided "mini-vacations" need never be repeated.

Sidebar The intent of not repeating scenarios is to expand students' perceptions and conceptualizations, and to connect students' thinking with as many of the Multiple Intelligences as possible.

Boredom is not an issue for most children because relaxed fantasy and directed daydreaming are intrinsically self-rewarding

However, some emotionally disturbed children may reject this activity, possibly because they lack comfort with more intimate association with their thoughts, images and imagination. What are these variables? Multiple Intelligences

Senses

Locations

Situations

Associations

Modes of Experience

Modes of experience include: Behaviors

Feelings

Sensations

Symbols and Mental Imagery

Thoughts and Beliefs

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Experiences

Self-Talk

Ideal, Values, Personal Meaning

As long as the guided imagery proceeds at a slow pace and is spoken with a rhythm based on relaxed breathing, the content is seldom relevant, so it is easy to work subject matter content into the narration. Not only will students remember the content-based associations, but many students are likely to respond with creative ideas and novel associations. Allowing students to write or draw in personal journals following a guided imagery session also pays integrated learning dividends. **Sidebar** Some teachers like to play background music when they conduct guided imagery sessions. This practice is beneficial, but the conducting teacher loses the ability to slow the pace of the narration to deepen students' relaxation because the students' rhythms will entrain to the beat of the music.

On the other hand, playing soft but lively music after a guided imagery session, such as quick pieces written by Mozart, can gear (rev up) students' attention to the pace needed to focus and concentrate.

If school administrators question the use of so many guided imagery sessions (or if they happen to walk in and observe, simply float the directions toward test-taking scenarios, and you will be evaluated as a "hero." It is easy to waft in references as to how this interlude leaves students relaxed and better prepared to focus as they enter the "garden of test-taking delights." **Summary** So, rather than cave in to the demand that you "scrub recess and other time-wasting activities" in favor of high-intensity academic inquiry and focused test-taking drill; instead, serve liberal helping of recess and change of pace activities during each school day.

The math of recess and change of pace activities is "addition and multiplication" … adding memory, idea integration and creative thinking into each student's learning.

And ignore the rants of anyone who would "subtract" recess from the school day. These folks are experiencing "clouded thinking," possibly due to the stress of intimidation (and vigilance) from the test-taking gestapo.

Remember that harmony with the basic biology of human development and synchronization with the natural mental processing of students' mental capacities yields superior results to pontificated political mandates.

The rhythm and learning requires change of pace activities to keep focus and concentration in tune. Recess is necessary for maintaining the delightful melody of learning success and accomplishment.

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