



Most school leaders would agree that time is a critical element in schooling. Time is a limited yet renewable resource in education. Often, if you wish to do more of something in your school, you need to do less of something else. Teaching and learning schedules are already packed so full that it is difficult to add more activities into them. It is a common belief, especially among politicians and other noneducators, that if something in school doesn't work well, it is because too little time is spent on it.

I was once with a delegation of concerned mathematics teachers and mathematicians who were meeting with their state governor and his advisors in the United States to hand over their appeal to improve mathematics learning outcomes in junior high school. Their main rationale was that mathematics performance, especially among boys, had decreased and attitudes toward learning mathematics

were rather negative among all youngsters. What this delegation was asking from the decision makers was to add an hour of mathematics to weekly schedules for all students. The governor listening to the delegation replied: “Why do you think asking children to do more of those things that they don’t like and won’t learn well anyway would do any good for their learning outcomes?” He closed the conversation by suggesting that perhaps pupils should have less exposure to mathematics and more to something that they really like and were interested in doing in school. Indeed, doing more of the same rarely leads to different results.

This episode could have happened in any other country because, in so many ways, education systems around the world are very similar. School curricula from one country to another have the same subjects and similar hierarchy—with reading literacy, mathematics, and science at the top of the list of important subjects, and music, arts, and physical activity typically at the bottom. School schedules in different countries are based on 45- to 55-minute lessons in which students study one subject at a time with one teacher in charge. Being a good student or a successful school is, more often than not, determined by how high or low test scores in reading literacy, mathematics, and science are without paying attention to students’ learning and growth in other subjects or other aspects of education.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS NEED A BREAK

When we take a closer look at policies and philosophies behind visible practices in schools and classrooms, significant differences between school systems can be seen. One difference is how much time teachers and students are expected to spend in teaching and learning in school. Let’s take a look at the role that time plays in typical public schools in the United States and in Finland. According to the data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) international database (OECD, 2016a) and from national statistics from the United States (Abrams, 2016) and Finland (Sahlberg, 2015), teachers in U.S. schools spend at least

25 percent more time teaching students compared to their peers in Finland. Identifying reliable and exactly comparable data about teachers' working and teaching time in the two countries presents some difficulties, but it is fair to say that American teachers spend one to two hours more every day in classrooms or in other ways instructing their students than do teachers in Finnish schools.

Another way to look at how time is spent in the United States and in Finland is to see how much time students spend on compulsory instruction. Although there are no entirely reliable data about students' compulsory or intended instructional time in these countries, OECD (2016a) data suggest that students in primary and junior high schools in the United States spend roughly 1,000 hours annually in various kinds of classroom activities, whereas that figure in Finland ranges from 660 hours in primary school to about 900 hours in middle school. These numbers translate to about 5.5 daily hours of schooling in the United States and from 3.5 to 4.7 hours a day in Finland. It seems, however, that more teaching hours and instructional time are not associated with better outcomes of education. In fact, including all OECD countries in this analysis reveals that there is no (positive) correlation between how long students' school days are and how much they learn during them (OECD, 2016a, 2016b).

Indeed, extended instructional time, for example, over the summer holidays, is not necessarily a good idea if the intention is to help all children learn better. Longer school days may be justified in some other ways but not by expecting happier and better educated children as an outcome. Study after study (see Shumaker, 2016) has also shown that increasing time for homework rarely leads to improved learning outcomes. An interesting aspect of Finland's school system is the relatively modest amount of time that students and teachers spend in school while still accomplishing fairly good results with modest spending. The same is true for homework in Finland.

HOW MUCH HOMEWORK IS OPTIMAL?

Although there are deeply rooted myths in the world about the absence of homework in the lives of Finnish children, the truth

is that homework does exist, but in most cases it doesn't have the same central role that it has in many schools in the United States. If you ask primary school students in Finland about how much time, on average, it takes for them to prepare for the next school day, you will hear anything from 0 to 30 minutes. According to different surveys on schools and anecdotal evidence provided by teachers, students in junior high school in Finland typically spend about half an hour completing their homework. High school students' homework loads can exceed several hours a day depending on how many courses students take at any given time, because the modular structure of high school in Finland allows significant variations in students' work loads (Sahlberg, 2015). When I talk about homework in the United States with teachers, parents, and especially with students, I often hear much higher figures than those in Finland. Having a two-hour homework standard in the United States is not rare. Private tutoring and homework play central roles in high-scoring Southeast Asian countries—South Korea, Japan, China, Singapore, and others—but much of the rest of the world has reasonable practices regarding what students are expected to do outside their lessons in school.

SHOULD RECESS BE MANDATORY?

Where is this all leading, you may wonder. Experiences from Finland and some other high-performing school systems that have instructional time requirements for their students that are lower than the international average invite a question: Are we asking children to do too much, too fast in our schools? Maybe there is a balance between formal instruction in classrooms and unstructured time to play during the school day that triggers student learning and well-being. I think the biggest difference between the cultures of schools in the United States and in Finland is the pace of students' and teachers' daily lives in school. I have visited numerous schools in different parts of the United States and seen students rushing from one class to another because of the short amount of time allowed for between-class

transitions. Teachers are equally busy, shifting from one lesson plan to another without a “pit stop” in the teachers’ lounge because they lack an appropriate break. I have also noted that more schools than before have either reduced recess or have no recess at all anymore.

The United Nations Standards of Human Rights recommends that prisoners have at least one hour of outdoor exercise daily. This sounds like a reasonable right, regardless of the reason for imprisonment. I think we should give the same right to all our children. In some states now—Tennessee, most recently—legislatures are taking away requirements for daily unstructured play for children in school. In 2016 in the United States, only 13 states had laws that mandate recess time during the school day, and 8 had recommendations for physical activity in schools. Most of the U.S. states, however, have *NO* general physical activity requirement and *NO* policy requiring or recommending recess or physical activity breaks. Therefore, I suggest that American schools would greatly benefit if they considered Finland’s recess model and adapted it for their schools instead of reducing summer holidays, lengthening school days, or adding homework for children. Some parents might be concerned that their children will fall even farther behind other children if classroom instruction time is decreased to allow more time for outdoor play. But the loss of effective learning time should not be an issue: Teachers and students in the United States spend significantly more time teaching and learning than their peers in Finland or in most other countries. Part of the current scheduled instructional time could be spent on something that has proven to have a positive impact on children: unstructured outdoor time for children and at the same time professional reflection time for teachers. But what is the evidence for that, you may ask?

Ironically, some of the most convincing research on the power of play has been done in the United States, at the same time that politicians and bureaucrats have been reducing recess time and play in and out of school. Children’s museums (e.g., White, 2013), children’s hospitals (e.g., Bickham, Kavanaugh, Alden, & Rich,

2015), academics (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013), philanthropic foundations (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2007; Lego Foundation, 2013), and research journals (e.g., *American Journal of Play*) are good examples of advocates for and evidence providers of the importance of recess and play for children's learning and development. A general finding in all of these studies and reviews is that recess and time to play benefit children's learning in school (in all subjects); enhance their social and emotional development; and are positively associated with their being more creative, more self-confident, less bullied, and more attentive in school.

Equally important, a wealth of published literature describes how physical activity improves children's health and mental well-being. A policy statement issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) concluded that "cognitive processing and academic performance depend on regular breaks from concentrated classroom work. This applies equally to adolescents and to younger children. To be effective, the frequency and duration of breaks should be sufficient to allow the student to mentally decompress." In Finland, this recommendation has been taken to heart for decades. Let's see how.

RECESS AS A REGULATION IN FINLAND

The Law on Education in Finland defines instructional time by stipulating that at least 45 minutes of every school hour must be allocated for teaching. In practice, the law is implemented in such a way that a lesson is 45 minutes long followed by a 15-minute recess. If schools decide to have longer lessons (e.g., 60 minutes or 75 minutes), then time for recess must be lengthened accordingly. Local municipalities and individual schools have a lot of autonomy to determine their daily schedules. Therefore, there is no universal model of a daily timetable for learning and recess in Finland. The law provides a general regulation that provides all children with a right to recess breaks in school. Figure 1 is an example of a typical school-day schedule for fifth graders (pupils who are about 11 or 12 years old) in Finland.

Figure 1 Example of a Typical Fifth-Grade School Day in Finland



Children in Finnish primary schools always go out for recess, rain or shine. In our fifth-grade school-day example in Figure 1, students have at least 60 minutes of recess during the day. In most schools, recess time is unstructured; it is up to the children to decide what they want to do. Some of them take a walk around the schoolyard with friends, while others play football (soccer) or other games. There are always those who prefer to chat with a friend or simply have a moment of solitude to arrange their emotions or thoughts. There are clear house rules for recess in every school, often prepared in partnership with children and parents, or at least agreed-to by them. At least two teachers must always be present in the schoolyard to watch over the children. Recess in Finnish schools is considered as essential learning time, not a waste of time. Real learning often happens in fresh air, during physical activity, while having conversations with others, or simply because of an opportunity to concentrate on understanding previous lessons.

When visiting schools in the United States that do not have recess, one of the concerns I often hear from teachers and principals is for the security and safety of children. What if something happens in the schoolyard during breaks? This very question came up during a visit of an education delegation from the United States to Helsinki. One day I took this group of superintendents, school principals, teachers, and education experts to see what the recess culture in Finnish primary schools looks like. We were standing in the schoolyard with the school principal when the school doors slammed open and about 300 kids aged 7 to 13 ran out to have their awaited break outdoors. A boy, probably a fifth grader, passed us by running toward the schoolyard's far corner, which was full of trees and benches to sit on. He climbed up one of the trees, like a small monkey would, and sat on a branch some 10 or 12 feet high. The American school principal who had been watching the boy seemed to become worried when the boy reached his obviously frequently visited spot of the tree: "What happens if that boy falls down from the tree?" she asked. "He probably wouldn't do that again," said the Finnish principal. In this and many other schools in Finland, teachers tolerate a fair amount of risks when children play or engage in physical activity, certainly more than seems to be

the case in the United States. “We provide all the safety that is necessary but not all safety that is possible to our children in school while they play,” I heard teachers in the school say when they explained the culture of recess to their guests.

UNSTRUCTURED OUTDOOR PLAY BENEFITS WELL-BEING AND LEARNING

The importance of outdoor play and physical activity for children’s health and learning is widely recognized in Finland and often confirmed by research from the United States (see box). Many of us, including me, need to move to think. There is no better way to enhance learning than to run and play in fresh air after or prior to a lesson that requires cognitive attention and deeper thinking. We also know from research that children’s brains work better when they move. An experienced Finnish teacher put it this way: “Not only do they concentrate better in class, but they are more successful at negotiating, socializing, building teams and friendships together” (Doyle, 2017). Numerous research studies conducted in the United States (e.g., Howie & Pate, 2012) and in Finland (e.g., Syväoja et al., 2012) confirm the benefits of unstructured outdoor play and physical activity on children’s well-being, health, and academic achievement in school.

More Time to Play in School

The LiINK Project,¹ led by Debbie Rhea of Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, Texas, aims to develop the whole child through increased recess and character development. The project now includes 20 schools that have been testing restructured daily schedules to provide students with more recess time. Rhea realized during her time in Finland that all schools allocate 15 minutes of each hour to recess so that children have time for unstructured outdoor play. Her point of entry into this project was the realization that schools have been cutting back on

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breaks to squeeze in more instructional time in the classroom, believing it improves academic performance. Studies have revealed, however, that students are fidgeting, failing to stay on task, or zoning out completely.

Research in Finland shows that children who engage in more physical activity and have time to play during the school day do better academically than children who are sedentary. Inspired by the Finnish experience, the LiiNK Project provides Texas and Oklahoma students with four 15-minute recess breaks each day—two before lunch and two after. These students also take part in “Positive Action,” a character-building curriculum taught three times a week. Results have been promising. LiiNK students were more disciplined and focused in the classroom, and they demonstrated social growth and development through a change in peer interactions. Off-task behaviors like fidgeting decreased by 25 percent compared to the control-school students. Students’ academic performance on reading and mathematics also improved significantly. The character-building curriculum reduced discipline issues and bullying, increased respect for self and others, improved honesty and self-concept, and heightened students’ sense of school-connectedness.

“Instead of coming home exhausted and watching TV or playing video games, parents reported that their kids were out riding bikes and playing with other kids,” said Rhea in an interview recently (Shape America, 2017). During my visit to Fort Worth to see the impact of LiiNK Project, I heard from teachers how students with more outdoor play were motivated to complete their homework sooner than before. This is what has been done in Finland for a long time. It is not rocket science. It involves understanding who children are and what they need in order to feel good and do well in school. Rhea told me, “Change is hard when numbers don’t tell the story—emotions do.”

1. See the LiiNK Project website at <https://liinkproject.tcu.edu>.

Ten years ago, Google decided to encourage its engineers to use up to 20 percent of their working time on something related to what the firm does and about which they are passionate. The

assumption behind this revolutionary idea was that innovation would have more space in a culture in which people have time to dig deeper in their own minds, interests, and curiosity. Gmail and Google News are results of what free-ranging engineers and scientists can invent when they follow this 20-percent rule. Many companies have since imitated Google by allowing their workers to take time to focus on their passions, in the hopes that this would improve performance.

Finland's recess policy in K-12 schools is an educational adaptation of Google's 20-percent rule—or, rather, Google's 20-percent leadership idea imitates Finland's primary schools' recess practice because Finnish schools have been allocating 20 percent of their total daily time to recess since long before Google was born. Indeed, in every Finnish school, students can spend one-fifth of their school day on things that they think are good for them. Finland's recess model also provides all teachers with the same advantage: Teachers have 15 minutes of every hour for their own activities. In most schools, teachers meet in teachers' lounges to chat with colleagues, drink a cup of coffee, or get ready for the next class. I argue that this simple idea of giving students and teachers time between lessons to rest their minds and brains helps them to think deeper, broader, and bolder when they get back to their core tasks—to learn and to teach.

Andy Hargreaves, one of the world's leading thinkers and an activist in educational leadership, has argued that we are now in transition between two eras of educational thinking that are very distinct from one another. The current era that we are just exiting, he says, is defined by increased effort for higher achievements, delivering faster and performing more cheaply. Performance standards, attainment targets, and international student assessments that are used to create global education league tables have been manifestations of this period, which started around the year 2000. The emerging new period is defined by a focus on students' well-being, engagement, and identity, Hargreaves says. At the same time, increasing obesity, type 2 diabetes, bullying in and out of cyberspace, and trauma caused by unrest, violence, and migration globally will be more present in our schools than ever before. This

new period that we are entering requires different approaches to schooling, both in the United States and in Finland. If we are serious about children's well-being and health, then we need to change what we expect them to do in school every day.

Ways to Move Forward

Next I offer concrete ideas inspired by practices and policies in Finland to enhance well-being, engagement, and performance of people and schools through recess and physical activity, using the 20-percent rule. These ideas are targeted at three levels of leadership: system leaders (state, district, or school-cluster level), principals (school level), and teachers (classroom level).

1. *System leaders: Pave the way to a new culture of recess*

Rethink the role of recess in schools based on research about the benefits of unstructured outdoor play and physical activity. Come up with a strong argument why more recess and outdoor play embedded in every day in school is good for all children. Recognize the health risks related to increased seat time in school and at home, which is often compounded by the increase in “screen time” among teenagers. Help your community and school board members to understand how increasing the narrow focus on academic work for long periods of time is backfiring, while at the same time the benefits of physical activity and play are often ignored when schools are seeking ways to improve. Become a champion of a “10,000 Steps a Day” campaign in your district, to encourage every student and every teacher to move at least 10,000 steps every day. Order safety inspections of playground equipment and facilities at regular intervals. Pave the way to a new culture of recess and keep in mind that when children play, quality is as important as quantity.

2. *Principals: Redesign your daily schedules*

Work with your district and board members to get their support for a year-long experiment with increased recess time. Be bold and do what your colleagues in Finland do:

Give your students and teachers fifteen-minute breaks between their lessons. No less. Then make a collective effort with parents, students, and teachers to speak up in support of recess, and work with your community and school board to make sure playgrounds are safe and well-equipped. Have clear rules for the use of digital devices in school, especially during recess. Invite children to think about how to have more physical activity in school every day. Protect the role of arts and music in your school curriculum, because these programs often support what children do during recess. Volunteer to help supervise recess whenever you can. Recruit people from your community to supervise recess: Schools benefit from extra eyes on the playground. Remember that recess quality, not just quantity, counts.

3. *Teachers: Make recess time a learning time*

Help children to learn how to reenergize their brains and their bodies so that they can be attentive, learn, and achieve in school. Teach them these self-regulation skills and remind them how these skills are keys to living a happy and healthy life. Make recess part of learning in school, not something that has no value. Make sure students have clothes and shoes that are suitable for outdoor play. In primary schools, teach your pupils games that all children can take part in so that everyone is active and feels included at recess. Accept that some students prefer solitude every now and then. Mobilize your PTA or PTO to raise funds to buy new equipment and maintain the old. Recess quality improves when the playground improves.